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APPROACH TO SHAKESPEARE

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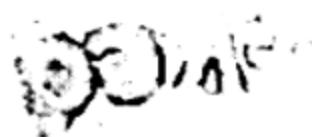
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APPROACH TO
SHAKESPEARE

By
D. A. TRAVERSI



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A U T H O R ' S N O T E

I AM only too well aware that this account of Shakespeare is painfully compressed, but I have tried to ensure that the statements made in it are adequately supported; in most cases, I have been forced to omit a great deal that seemed relevant to the point at issue.

Anyone who writes on Shakespeare must be indebted, consciously and otherwise, to a vast body of criticism. It is, therefore, impossible to assess one's debt to the great line of authors who, from Dryden to Bradley, have dealt with the plays from their own various points of view; any modern critic must take that debt for granted. Among modern writers, I have been particularly helped by Mr. Wilson Knight, whose work, in spite of many disagreements, has seemed to me the most comprehensive modern attempt to deal with Shakespeare; by Mr. T. S. Eliot, whose remarks on Elizabethan drama are almost always illuminating; by Sir Henry Granville Barker, for his understanding of Shakespeare's dramatic craft; by Mr. L. C. Knights, for his invariably close and accurate study of the poetic

AUTHOR'S NOTE

make-up of the plays; and by a great many others whose influence, direct or indirect, will be noted by anyone acquainted with recent Shakespeare criticism.

I must thank Mr. Martin Turnell for reading the manuscript of this book, and for making a number of valuable suggestions.

D. A. TRAVERSI.

I

CHAPTER ONE

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C H A P T E R O N E

INTRODUCTORY

MODERN Shakespeare criticism presents a curious picture. It is impossible not to feel that the great tradition of the last century—running from Goethe and Coleridge to Bradley's *Shakespearian Tragedy*—has reached something like the limits of its usefulness. Not only can little further be discovered in that direction, so that modern attempts to carry on the romantic methods have been little more than repetitions of what Bradley did with greater distinction, but the very starting-points of this school of criticism are no longer altogether acceptable. There were important historical reasons for the almost exclusive insistence of the Victorians upon character; the subjectivism of Romantic thought found it much easier to work in terms of individual feelings, doubts, and problems than to concentrate on the study of a balanced poetic and dramatic construction. *Hamlet* the play (it is the stock example) became an inexhaustible study of the dissatisfactions of the Romantic self; and even the greatest critics found it impossible to avoid confusing Shakespeare's creation with their own often quite different interests. The writers of the nineteenth century produced valuable work on the characters of the plays in so far as their

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emotions coincided with those of Shakespeare himself; but their discoveries were nearly always produced by dismembering the unity of the plays to get at those aspects of the individual character which they found most sympathetic.

At the present day, most critics are prepared to admit the irrelevance of many of these attempts to apply the methods of biography to Shakespeare's strictly dramatic creations. We all know, for example, that to discuss Hamlet's life *outside* the limits of the play, to attempt to deduce the manner of his upbringing in order to explain his subsequent behaviour, is an illegitimate extension of the critic's proper function. Nor can we share the easy confidence with which some writers fathered their own philosophies on to Shakespeare's work. But, although we are certain that the old outlook was incomplete and sometimes misleading—just as we know that Tree's sumptuous and realistic productions were not the last word in the presentation of the plays—we are far less sure what is to replace them. Many useful approaches are being opened out; Sir Henry Granville Barker's study of the Elizabethan stage and Mr. Wilson Knight's methods of 'interpretation' are outstanding examples. Yet neither of these writers attains to a coherent and satisfactory account of his subject. Granville Barker, when he passes beyond strictly theatrical deductions, is often dependent upon the established judgements in a way which suggests he has been unable to develop fully the implications of his own discoveries; and Mr. Wilson Knight tends increasingly to sacrifice his discrimination to personal (and not very disciplined) meta-

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physical speculations. Neither shows much sign of doing what Bradley, once we accept his assumptions, did almost to perfection; that is, to produce a complete and harmonious account of the Shakespearian experience. By the side of the Victorian writers, modern work on the plays is fragmentary and tentative, and when it attempts to be more it is scarcely impressive.

In such a situation, what is the critic to do? He has to accept the substance of the modern objections to the subjective Victorian methods; the value of these methods was limited to just that amount of insight which romantic self-centredness could bring to Shakespeare. Such insight, in the best of these critics, was certainly considerable; but the modern writer is compelled to look beyond it. His aim is, as far as possible, to isolate and define the experience which sought expression in the plays, and which makes them individual and valuable. It seems obvious that this experience will find its most immediate expression in the language and verse of the plays. If a writer's intention is apparent in his choice of subject and general treatment, it has an even closer relation to the words and phrases in which he expresses himself. The word, as we shall see again and again in dealing with Shakespeare, is the product of the most intimate relations of thought and feeling, nervous sensitivity and conscious emotion. Indeed, word and thought, word and feeling, form part of an indivisible process of poetic creation; and, in the greatest poetry, it becomes impossible to separate the personal development of an experience from its formal expression in words. It only remains

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to add that the individual word cannot be considered apart from the verse in which it performs its organic function. To separate the study of verse forms from an awareness of linguistic quality—after the manner of the classical prosodist at work upon the vernacular—is to kill one's understanding of that verse. The development of Shakespeare's versification is revealed in a growing flexibility of response to the increasingly complex needs of the individual word. The poet's continual effort to master his experience, to project it fully into his plays, is most easily traced in this continual adaptation of verse structure to the growing pressure of his emotions.

These considerations are here simply set down, not argued; I hope that my account will do something to justify them. I intend to show, then, that the growth of Shakespeare's capacity for emotion involves a new complexity of language, which in turn calls for a continual modification of typical Elizabethan blank verse. And this, to go a step further, demands a new kind of dramatic unity, a fresh conception of the function of plot and character, such as Kyd or Marlowe could never have imagined. I say this here because I wish to emphasize that this approach does *not* betray or neglect the purely dramatic element (if such an abstraction may be conceded to exist) in the plays. Plot and character are obviously of supreme importance, and no criticism can afford to neglect them; but it remains true that we shall understand even plot and character better, if we are fully aware of the quality of the emotion behind Shakespeare's verse in a given play. Since (as I have said) this quality is most intimately,

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most immediately expressed in the language, an insistence upon the priority of a study of the verse would seem to be anything but prejudicial to an admiration of Shakespeare's dramatic craftsmanship. To take a single example; Mr. M. R. Ridley, in the course of some remarks on *Macbeth*,¹ finds himself puzzled by 'the sketchiness and flatness' of most of the characters, which is evidently for him a blemish in a great play. But if, as I shall attempt to show, the play forms a poetic unity which is closely-knit even for Shakespeare, and in which each event and each character have just their part *and no more* to play in an organic whole which transcends them, the objection clearly rests upon a misapprehension. We are dealing, in short, with a poetic creation from which no single part can profitably be isolated; and the key to this creation lies in the feeling which underlies every part of it, and which can most easily be apprehended in the quality of its language.

Moreover, by taking the written word as our unit, we may hope to avoid some of the pitfalls into which, it is generally agreed, the great Romantic critics often fell. These writers, as we have seen, continually emphasized Shakespeare's creation of character. Now the creation of character (and the appreciation of it) involves a complex synthetic activity. There are a vast number of separate impressions, more or less subtle, to be brought into unity, and in such a process, it is hardly possible for any critic to avoid an illegitimate reading of himself into these characters. Even in the case of a single word, there

¹ M. R. Ridley, *Shakespeare's Plays—A Commentary* (Dent, 1937), p. 179.

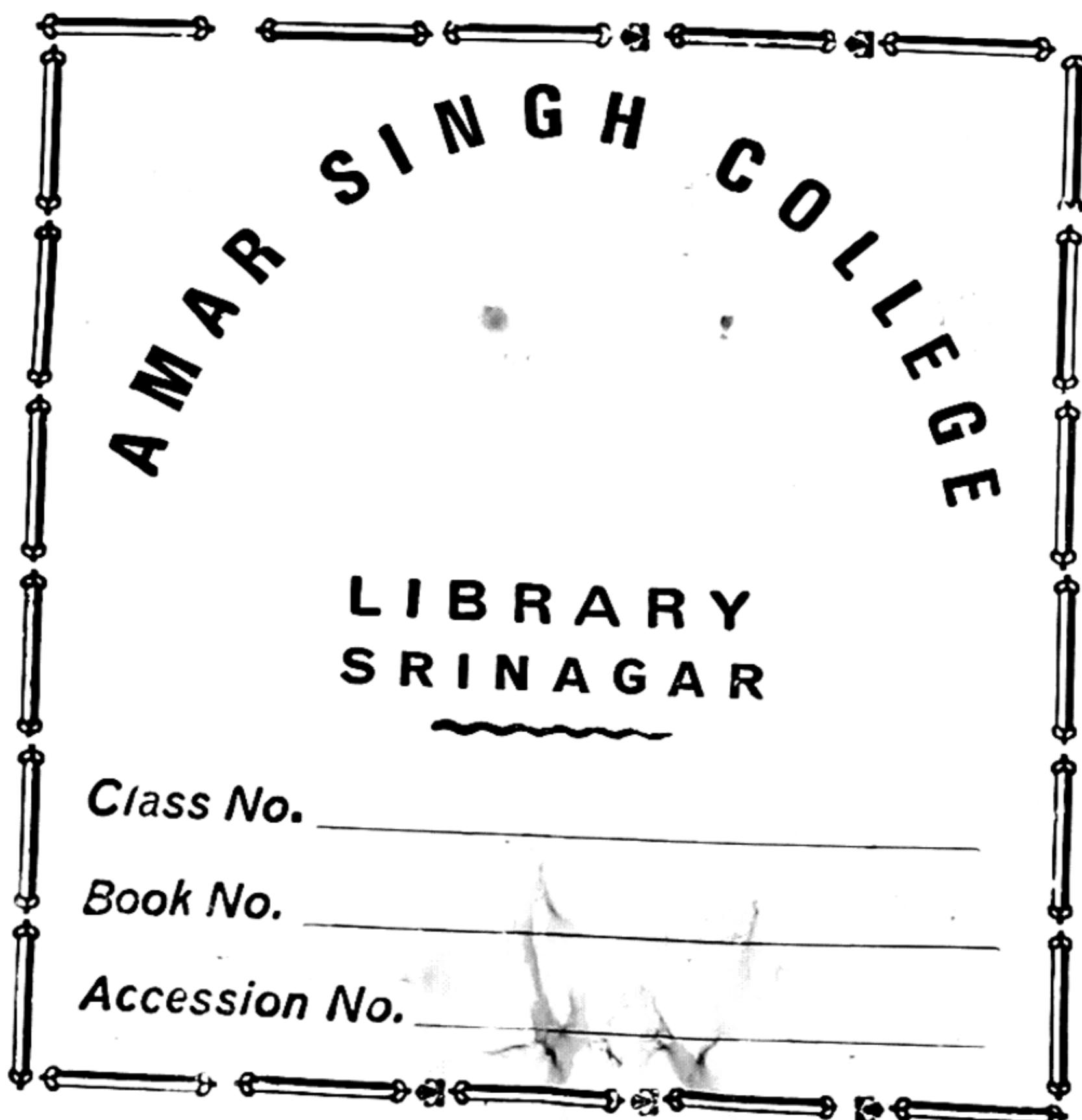
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is a constant need of critical discipline, if we are not to read our own interests into Shakespeare's; and yet the word is obviously the simplest unit at our disposal. Working on such a basis, it may be possible to reinterpret the critical discoveries of the past, of whatever period, and to clear them of the partiality which they owed to historical and social circumstance; and we may even aspire to the correction of our own partiality. Proceeding from the written word and the verse to the greater complexities of which they form a part, we may hope to contribute something to a general picture of the Shakespearian experience.

Bennings

CHAPTER TWO

B



C H A P T E R T W O

BEGINNINGS

IT is obvious that a poet's language is only in part his own creation. Centuries of usage have moulded it and developed the qualities in which it excels. These qualities are in part the product of a whole people's way of living, and in part the result of a continual process of related sifting and enrichment which we might call *literary tradition*. So, in order to study the peculiarities of Shakespeare's use of language, we must first be aware of the point in the literary tradition of England at which he appeared; for that point will naturally be his starting-place.

The literary language of some countries is dominated by specifically cultured and civilized interests; Italian, with its continual stress on the order, clarity, and intellectual coherence of experience, is a case in point. In English, however, up to and beyond the time of Shakespeare, the life of the language was essentially dependent upon popular idiom. When the Norman Conquest brought with it an alien culture which drove the native speech from respectable use, it was the popular pulpit¹ and the popular

¹ See G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Mediaeval England* (Cambridge, 1931).

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dramatic spectacle which kept the vernacular alive; it finally produced in Langland a great native poet, and allied with a properly assimilated culture in the creation of Chaucer's best work. The sources of English linguistic vitality, as conditioned by profound social, economic, and intellectual causes in mediaeval England, were essentially local, essentially connected with the intimate, self-contained society of the village and the country town.¹ Intellectual development could give to this foundation order, precision, all this is implied by technique; but it was left to the people to give the life. Even the Humanist Ascham, who was anxious to subdue the roughness of English to the greater elegance and smoothness of the classics, is continually coming to life in personal and idiomatic references. When he wishes to condemn the current comedies of 'low' life for their meanness of subject, he breaks out into prose, whose quality is purely English and popular; he complains that it deals chiefly with:

'... vnthrifty young men, craftie seruantes, sotle bawdes, and wilie harlots, and so is much spent in finding out fine fetches and packing vp pelting matters, soch as in London commonlie cum to the hearing of the Masters of Bridewell.'

(*The Scolemaster.*)

The local reference is typical. It is the same spirit which enabled Shakespeare to introduce familiar imagery into the most unlikely parts of his tragedies. A modern writer could scarcely express Antony's passion by a contrast with 'dungy earth'; nor could

¹ On the whole of this question see L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (Chatto & Windus, 1937), pp. 301-14.

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he allow the solemn and stilted Polonius to exclaim :

‘ Let me be no assistant for a state,
But keep a farm and carters.’

(Hamlet, II. ii.)

Yet both these phrases are splendidly justified by their significance in the plays in which they occur. The fact that Shakespeare did not find this type of expression strange is some measure of the critic's need to think and feel in terms of an unusual literary idiom.

These facts, however, represent only a part of the situation in Shakespeare's day. If the traditional language of mediaeval poetry, as seen in Chaucer and Langland, was above all concretely and locally realized, that was because mediaeval man was aware of a definite place in an established society, was firmly grounded in a universe whose nature and end were defined by Christian philosophy; the signs of breakdown which can be found both in Chaucer and in Langland are still overshadowed in them by the effects of the mediaeval synthesis. *Piers Plowman*, like the *Divine Comedy*, is not the expression of an isolated individual, but of a man whose individuality speaks within a determined social, philosophic, and religious context. The dominating facts of Shakespeare's age were the destruction of this context and the discovery of the autonomous self which we associate with the Renaissance. The inevitable result was a vast extension of interests, and a corresponding lack of any spiritual or intellectual conception by which these interests might be disciplined. The literature of the Renaissance, being

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concerned with exploring this new conception of the self and its possibilities, could not hope for any adequate synthesis of its experience which should transcend the personal. Shakespeare's idiom and outlook are still largely mediaeval; but the harmony or pattern which we see gradually evolving out of his work is a purely *personal* pattern, the richest and greatest of its kind that has ever existed. (Mr. Eliot once remarked¹ that 'Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world equally between them: there is no third'.) It is equally true that they divide what Mr. Eliot chose, for his own purposes, to call 'the modern world' into two parts: the mediaeval part, dominated by the synthesis of faith and reason, and the strictly modern part, in which the enormous possibilities of the new discovery of the individual have been explored at the expense of that synthesis.

These facts can be considered in terms of linguistic development. In Shakespeare's own time, the new forces of the Renaissance combined with the natural mental agility of the Elizabethans to create an enormous new body of words and phrases. The result of this impact of fresh thoughts and feelings upon the traditional structure of the language is best seen in the disintegrating tendencies of Euphuism. Euphuism is more than a pedantic fashion, it is partly the result of pouring new subtleties into an inadequate mould. Words, followed for the sake of the complexities which condition them, overreach the necessary limits imposed by the logical structure of the sentence. They are left hanging in a void

¹ In an essay on Dante: *Selected Essays* (Faber & Faber, 1932), p. 251.

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where the reader's mind, unless he be equally ready to abandon himself to anarchy, is unable to follow them. Much of Shakespeare's writing, verse and prose, is Euphuistic in its antecedents, but its exuberance is increasingly tempered and qualified by the growing harmony of experience which can be traced through his work.

If we wish to see the influence of these general characteristics upon dramatic verse, it is better to leave Shakespeare apart for a moment and turn to a mind which, although interesting and even original in its own way, was far less extraordinary in the range and quality of its gifts. The following speech from Marston's curiously intractable play *Antonio and Mellida* will serve as an example of the Elizabethan poetic mind at work:

'My thoughts are fix'd in contemplation
Why this huge earth, this monstrous animal,
That eats her children, should not have eyes and ears.
Philosophy maintains that Nature's wise,
And forms no useless or imperfect thing.
Did Nature make the earth, or the earth Nature?
For earthly dirt makes all things, makes the man,
Moulds me up honour; and, like a cunning Dutchman,
Paints me a puppet even with seeming breath;
And gives a sot appearance of a soul.'

Marston's is a particularly instructive case. Not a man of strikingly individual talent, he was yet sensitive to the genius of those who were writing around him in the early years of James I's reign, and his plays are full of echoes of their work. What must strike us in this passage is the evident love of speculation displayed, coupled with an equally evi-

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dent inability to keep to the point. He is interested in his theories, not for the sake of truth, but for the curious possibilities they suggest to his imagination. It is the grotesque aspect of 'this monstrous animal', the earth, the fact that she could be said to eat her children, and yet not to have eyes and ears, that appeals to him. And so, instead of making a coherent statement, Marston indulges his fancy and seeks to express it in vivid, vernacular phrases like 'moulds me up honour' and 'paints me a puppet'. The vividness and the anarchy are equally typical.

This passage brings out two facts which are essential to an understanding of Shakespeare. In the first place, there is significance in Marston's use of the word 'philosophy'. For it is precisely 'philosophy', in the sense of a coherent attitude to life, that is lacking in Elizabethan writing. Verbal exuberance is a reflection of intellectual chaos; 'philosophy' was nothing more than an unwieldy body of survivals from classical and Christian thought. The Elizabethan attitude, for example, to the prevalent 'Stoic' ethic was not an intellectual one; it was rather emotional and even sensational, a question largely of theatrical pose. Such a 'philosophy' could not be expected to supply a writer with the unifying, clarifying influence provided, let us say, by mediaeval Catholicism to Dante. Appreciation of Shakespeare is in no sense a question of 'philosophy'. It must proceed rather from a sense of the variety and complexity of Shakespeare's experience. This brings us to our second point. Even Marston's mediocre poetry is some indication of the vividness and agility with which the Eliza-

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bethan poet felt, and of the chaos to which his facility could so easily lead. To induce order into material that seems to have been naturally impatient of it would require an unusual effort—how unusual one may infer from the very extent of the chaos to be organized. In the absence of a ‘philosophy’, it could only be a *personal* effort, an organization imposed by individual living. It is this evolution of a personal order as it expresses itself through the plays that we have to trace.

Shakespeare’s early plays show little striking originality. His blank verse at this stage is appreciably less individual than Marlowe’s; it is a development of that used by Peele and Greene, though Marlowe is also exploited with technical competence. It differs from the work of his predecessors, if at all, in superior control and in a more consistent texture. *Richard II* is a typical work of this period, and this a typical extract from that play:

‘I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world;
And for because the world is populous,
And here is not a creature but myself,
I cannot do it; yet I’ll hammer it out.
My brain I’ll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father; and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts
And these same thoughts people this little world
In humours like the people of this world,
For no thought is contented.’ (v. v.)

There is very little question here of tragic feeling. Shakespeare is less concerned with Richard’s unhappy situation than with the development of his rather sententious comparison. The verse obviously

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reflects this superficial quality. The stresses fall completely according to pattern, and once we have grasped the run of the rhythm, it falls pat to the accustomed ear. The virtues of the piece are not compatible with delicate or direct feeling; they are virtues of artificial construction, turning on the connected succession of ideas, from parents to their 'generation', and from that to the vast extension of metaphor implied in 'people this little world', followed by the characteristic taking-up of 'people' in the next line. This is not great verse, and certainly not great Shakespearian verse. It is verse written within a limited convention; there are signs in *Richard II* of a deliberate experiment in sophisticated lyricism. It is important chiefly as an exercise in the writing of balanced and connected blank verse, an exercise which helped to ensure that, when the great floods of associated ideas which characterize the work of Shakespeare's maturity came to demand expression, his verse forms should not buckle and break down into incoherence under the strain.

The unity of these early plays is mainly imposed by the plot. The particular problems which distinguish Shakespeare criticism only begin to make themselves felt when this purely formal unity is broken into by the first signs of a distinctive, individual sensibility. These are not to be found in the carefully balanced plot of a work like *The Comedy of Errors*, nor even in the much finer comedies that followed. It is in the historical plays that we first feel Shakespeare's unmistakable individuality; and the first to interest us in this way is *King John*. *King John* provides us with a new

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kind of character, a character whose relations to the sequence of events is different from anything in *Richard II*—I refer to Faulconbridge, the Bastard. Faulconbridge does not derive his vitality from the rather scrappily developed world of intrigue and politics around him; his life is drawn from the dramatist himself, who places him in the middle of events, and makes him judge and commentator upon them. With the Bastard, Shakespeare's keen, critical interest in historical processes comes to life, and proceeds to take charge of the play.

This new interest, most significantly of all, is at once communicated in a new vitality of language; we hear of—

' . . . France, whose armour conscience buckled on,
Whom zeal and charity brought to the field
As God's own soldier, rounded in the ear
With that same purpose-changer, that sly devil,
That broker, that still breaks the pate of faith,
That daily break-vow, he that wins of all,
Of kings, of beggars, old men, young men, maids,
Who, having no external thing to lose
But the word " maid ", cheats the poor maid of that,
That smooth-faced gentleman, tickling Commodity . . . '
(ii. i.)

If we compare these lines with any from *Richard II*, we must feel at once a new life, quick with the raciness of common speech. There is the typical Elizabethan concern, already noted in Marston, to squeeze out all the possibilities of an idea, even sacrificing its development to the fullest expression of it in nervous and immediate language. The last few lines, for example, contain a common telescoping of syntax to answer to the needs of unhampered

expression; the relative ‘who’ appears to refer to ‘maids’, especially when taken with the following parenthesis, but actually is connected with ‘cheats’ and so points back to ‘Commodity’. Elizabethan language was enabled by its natural fluidity to attain to this vivid compression, which became an important part of Shakespeare’s mature technique. Here it is already part of the general effect of the speech. The phrases—‘rounded in the ear’, ‘breaks the pate of faith’, ‘daily break-vow’, ‘tickling Commodity’—show, compared with more conventional work, a new immediacy and a new agility in bringing striking expressions triumphantly together; they show, in fact, a new kind of interest in the subject. This new interest is *critical*. The Bastard’s life, as we have said, is in a peculiar sense Shakespeare’s. By him, Shakespeare enters into the play and comments on the intrigues of Louis, the bravado of Austria, and the villainy of John; he shows up the paltriness of the political action in the light of his own developing comic vitality.

Remembering the Bastard’s reliance upon common speech, we shall be prepared to see the same comic conception developed more completely in the Falstaff of *Henry IV*, Part I. Falstaff, too, is a comic character introduced into a world of intrigue, calculation, and wordy ‘honour’. When Falstaff soliloquizes over the dead body of Sir Walter Blunt (“I like not that grinning honour that Sir Walter hath”)¹ he is voicing Shakespeare’s comment on the unreason of a sacrifice to ‘honour’ in a battle caused by Worcester’s dishonest ambition and the King’s

¹ Act v, Scene iii.

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usurpation. And the new vitality of Shakespeare's language in these comic scenes suggests the extent to which his developing insight is bound up with them.

It is necessary to insist at this point that the First Part of *Henry IV* (and to a much lesser degree *King John*) is concerned with a great deal more than social criticism.¹ The play is raised by its dominating and pointed vitality to the level of great poetry. But that vitality is still concentrated on one character. The King, Hotspur, Worcester, and Glendower are still products of critical analysis rather than organic parts of a poetic universe. The poet stands apart from his subject, balancing its possibilities, its pretensions one against the other. Now this is not the distinctive quality of Shakespeare's mature work, which presents a sequence of events as moulded into poetic shape, modified and illuminated by the force of personal experience. To attain this condition, Shakespeare's distinctive life would have to be felt, not only in Falstaff, but in every other character; all should draw their life equally from the poet's individuality. A movement in this direction seems to be taking place in *Henry IV*, Part II.

The verse of the Second Part of *Henry IV*, from its opening scenes, suggests a shift of feeling from all that was expressed in Part I. This speech of Northumberland, when he receives the news of Hotspur's defeat and death at Shrewsbury, strikes a new note:

‘In poison there is physic; and these news,
Having been well, that would have made me sick,
Being sick, have in some measure made me well;

And as the wretch, whose fever-weaken'd joints,
Like strengthless hinges, buckle under fire
Out of his keeper's arms, even so my limbs,
Weaken'd with grief, being now enraged with grief,
Are thrice themselves.' (I. i.)

The verse is, in ancestry, clearly that of the early Shakespeare. The use of neat antitheses, mathematically rather than emotionally opposed, is reminiscent of *Romeo* and *Richard II*. The machinery is prominent to a degree that would never be tolerated in the great tragedies. But there is a feeling, too, that the poet is reaching out through these devices to new elaborations of experience. The verse is no longer merely a development of statements following the oratorical structure of the norm of blank verse. It aims, however obscurely, at a new kind of poetry in which verse shall be, not merely a consecutive statement, but an attempt to catch the shifts and tensions of the poetic consciousness as it strains to convey the fullness of a particular experience. That is why the opening lines do more than state a neatly balanced antithesis. They make use of something which foreshadows the compressed and contorted syntax of the mature plays, and they use it to convey the fundamental hesitation in Northumberland's own mind. There is a suggestion that 'Having been well' and 'Being sick' might refer to the speaker as well as to the bad news, for both are discussed in terms of health and sickness. The individual and the external situation are thus felt to be caught up in a fundamental blight, of which Northumberland is only the symptom. Shakespeare, moreover, is not content to contrast the speaker's

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age and weakness with the need for strong action. He aims to state and to convey in the motion of his verse, the tragic disharmony in the old man himself, as well as that between him and his environment. He gives Northumberland a kind of life which makes his limbs ' thrice themselves'; but he immediately opposes to this the impression of ' weaken'd ' and the fever implied in ' fire '. Most striking of all is the contradiction in his statement that good news would have made him ' sick ', whereas bad news (he tries to believe) has made him ' well '. A comparison of Northumberland with an earlier study in vacillation, that of York in *Richard II*, will show how Shakespeare has gained solidity and actuality with his advance in poetic control.

This advance in the handling of verse points, as I have been suggesting, to a development in Shakespeare's mastery over his material. Northumberland is not simply a character to be observed and analysed. He is an organic part of the poetic creation into which Shakespeare is projecting his experience, and his individuality is conditioned by its relation to every other part of that creation; that, at least, is the ideal to which the poet was tending. The disunity in Northumberland's mind, for example, is related to similar defects in the whole rebel campaign. The Earl, feverishly bold in the moment of despair, abstains a little later through fear from the cause to which he is now hopelessly committed; and the rebels, whose only hope, as Mowbray points out (iv. i.), lies in determined action and complete victory, surrender to the cunning of Lancaster and Westmorland. These divisions are

doubles of incidents used in Part I, but here they acquire a new significance. The rebels of Part II are no longer merely crafty and short-sighted politicians; they are men no longer in control of the flow of events, which now pushes them on to unforeseen conclusions. The leaders are not, like Hotspur and Douglas, active and impetuous; like Northumberland they are infirm and feeble, palsied by fear and uncertainty. The blight, moreover, falls impartially upon both parties. The King is old and sick, and his infirmity is only an aspect of the general disease in which he participates, the disease provided by Shakespeare's controlling poetic intent. In the King, as in Northumberland, there is a fundamental division, this time between a distant aspiration for just and unsullied kingship and a present sense of his usurpation as a continual cause of rebellion. His strongest emotion is a nostalgia for peace and sleep. It is born, typically enough, of a sense of the continual and meaningless procession of events beyond human control:

‘O God, that one might read the book of fate
And see the revolution of the times
Make mountains level, and the continent,
Weary of solid firmness, melt itself
Into the sea!’ (iii. i.)

To appreciate how closely this weariness with ‘solid firmness’ and this sense of the impersonality of time are connected with Shakespeare’s development we need a knowledge of the Sonnets; many of them turn precisely on these themes. For the moment, it is enough to say that these lines *are* steeped in personal emotion, and that their feeling dominates

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both parties in this play. Loyalists and rebels have become, not merely acute political studies, but complementary aspects of a poetic universe created by Shakespeare and unified by the power of his growing personal experience.

The mood of *Henry IV*, Part II, issues in a typical attitude towards the state. England is constantly spoken of as an unhealthy body which needs a drastic purge; it may, indeed, be incurable. The Archbishop tells his fellow-conspirators that—

‘The commonwealth is sick of their own choice,’ (I. iii.) and applies the image at length. He also repeats it more explicitly in his parley with Westmorland (IV. i). On the other side, the King remarks to Warwick:

‘Then you perceive the body of our kingdom
How foul it is; what rank diseases grow,
And with what danger, near the heart of it.’ (III. i.)

The English state is the universe of this play, and its disease is a disunion within that universe: a disunion, in other words, in Shakespeare’s own experience. From disease to the aged impotence of Northumberland and the King is an easy step, and so the disease itself is connected with the evident disharmony between man and circumstance, between action and indecision; the last of these opposites already suggests a glance forward to *Hamlet*.

Even Falstaff is affected by the requirements of the dominant mood. No longer is he felt, as in Part I, to be outside the action in which he participates, transcending and criticizing it by his own

vitality. He has become subdued to the life around him. Death, disease, and the flesh now dominate his thoughts, so much so that the critics have detected the realistic, moral influence of Ben Jonson. No doubt that influence exists, but Shakespeare's emphasis is both individual and in tune with the rest of his play. It is not grotesque or farcical, even in the serious Elizabethan meaning of the word; it insists rather on tragic pathos, and the corruption of human values by time and ill-living. Falstaff's most memorable remark is—'Peace, good Doll! do not speak like a death's head; do not bid me remember mine end'—striking right across Jonson's simplified, intense effects, and bringing in the tragic note. It connects Falstaff with the dark feeling of the political scenes, a connection made yet more explicit by Poins' comment in the same scene—'Is it not strange that desire should so many years outlive performance?'¹ These words join Falstaff's disease and concupiscence to the malady and dis-harmony common to Northumberland and the King. Here again Shakespeare is groping towards feelings which become fully explicit in the Sonnets (many of which must have been written at this period) and receive more definite expression in the tragedies.

These considerations throw light on the famous *crux* of the play—the rejection of Falstaff by the newly crowned King.² Shakespeare not only accepted

¹ This remark carries us forward, by its phrasing, to Troilus': 'This is the monstruosity in love, lady, that the will is infinite and the execution confined, that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit.' (III. ii, quoted on p. 57.) The echo is striking testimony to the continuity of Shakespeare's thought in the plays of this period.

² Act v, Scene v.

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the artistic difficulty involved in the rejection, but wove it into the feeling of his play; it is a most revealing example of the subjugation of plot to the dramatist's growing experience. For the cleavage between Falstaff and Prince Hal is only a projection of one fundamental to the play, one between unbridled impulse, which degenerates into swollen disease, and the cold spirit of successful self-control, which inevitably becomes inhuman. It is not accidental that the Falstaff of Part II is given an altogether new burden of lechery, age and disease. When King Henry denounces him as—

‘So surfeit-swell'd, so old and so profane’

he makes a true criticism which would not have seemed excessive to an Elizabethan audience; and he backs it with the austerity of a great religious tradition when he adds—

‘Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace.’

Yet, though we must take the King's words at their own value, the same applies to Falstaff's criticisms of the royal family; both are complementary aspects of a poetic universe whose principle of unity is in Shakespeare's personal experience. Lancaster, whose deceit wins a victory over the rebels at Gaultree Forest, is, in Falstaff's eyes, ‘a young, *sober-blooded* boy’, one of those who, ‘when they marry, get wenches’. The flexibility and richness of Falstaff's prose in a succession of phrases like ‘apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery, and delectable shapes’ only emphasizes by contrast the coldness, almost the perversion, behind the successful kings and generals

of this play. Prince Hal in *Henry IV*, Part II, strikes a new note of calculating vulgarity, which he regards as a necessary condition of his success. His remark to Poins—‘My appetite was not princely got’—is highly typical; it implies a contrast between the natural processes of living (‘appetite’ is a word which continually interested Shakespeare and other Elizabethans) and the indifference to humanity which is required of the ‘princely’ state. There is no need to be sentimental on behalf of either the Prince or Falstaff. The ‘unpleasantness’ detected by the critics in their relationship is a necessary part of the play. It springs, indeed, from its most distinct individuality; it translates into dramatic terms the ‘disease’ which we have found hanging over the English state, and it relates all the divisions between age and youth, between action and inaction, between folly and calculation to a developing split in Shakespeare’s feeling. The precise meaning, in terms of the poet’s sensibility, of this bitter contrast of aged dissolution and the controlled coldness so unnaturally attributed to youth, cannot be defined without a knowledge of the Sonnets; in *Henry IV*, indeed, its later developments are barely implicit.

I have dwelt a little on *Henry IV*, Part II, because it is a splendid introduction to the method of Shakespeare’s mature drama. It would be interesting to carry this analysis of the divergence between political success and common humanity into *Henry V*; what else is implied in the sombre discussion between the King and his soldiers, Williams and Bates, in that play? But it is sufficient to have suggested how this new ‘political’ interest in Shakespeare is accom-

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panied and made significant by a strikingly personal development of experience. The individual emotion illuminates the external situation, and the situation becomes a perfect medium for the emotion. I have tried to indicate these developments in the rise of a fresh quality of language, in the greater nervous complexity of the blank verse which points to the new penetration of dramatic material with Shakespeare's personal experience. I have also tried to show how these qualities pass increasingly beyond the mere limit of the speech, how they radiate into the surrounding matter, giving it a *poetic* as well as a merely external dramatic unity. The coherence of plot and character is being modified by a new conception of unity, which expresses itself in an interwoven texture of imagery. This new factor is not prejudicial to plot or character, but it is already beginning to modify them, to make them more functional to the presiding poetic mood. In short, *Henry IV* illustrates my opening contention, that developing subtlety and insight in the plays is linked to developing experience in the poet, and that growth in the subtle handling of language is the most exact indication of that development. These points being made, we are ready to approach the mature plays.

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CHAPTER THREE

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C H A P T E R T H R E E

THE SONNETS

THE transition between Shakespeare's early plays and the more complex modes realized in his mature work is provided by the Sonnets. In them, we may detect, gathered up in concentrated form within the limits distinctly laid down by convention, interests which were later worked out in the series of great tragedies. Not all the Sonnets are of equal interest to the critic. This is natural enough; they were not written during a short period, but were spread over a period of years extending at least up to 1601, which we may suppose to have been the date of *Hamlet*. Their content, as we might expect from the diversity of dates, is extremely varied, ranging from a number of purely conventional statements of the Sidneyan love-theme to achievements as personal, within their compass, as *Hamlet*. This infinity of variations is a most valuable feature of the Sonnets to us; for in it we can trace more clearly a process similar to that by which the conventional plots and versification of the early days became moulded to the requirements of the individuality which created *Henry IV*. I say more clearly, because the sharply defined limits of the sonnet convention make it simpler for the critic to observe the modifications introduced into them by Shakespeare's maturing purpose.

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The conventions of the Sonnet, as already established by Sidney and Spenser, influenced Shakespeare in his own use of the same form. Indeed, Shakespeare's achievement might be defined as the playing off of his keen sense of actuality against a conventional basis which gave it both pointedness and enormous possibilities of varying the poetic mood. The relation of serious emotion to an established convention involves a contrast which may be used either to intensify feeling or to indicate irony by a suggestion of incompatibility. This complexity of mood is reflected in a distinct linguistic quality. The Sonnet, as Shakespeare found it, encouraged great verbal ingenuity, which was usually little more than a mere exercise in poetic sophistication. It affected even punctuation. There is one Sonnet in Shakespeare's series (No. LXXXI) in which every possible pair of lines, if we except the second, the third, and the eleventh, can be read so as to make a complete sentence. The device is, in itself, of little poetic value; but it suggests the degree of verbal control behind the Sonnets, a control which needed only to be informed by urgent personal feeling to produce the subtle intensity of the best of these poems.

The entry of personal feeling can, as usual, be gauged by the appearance of a new verbal immediacy. It makes itself felt in lines such as—

‘Against my love shall be, as I am now
With Time’s injurious hand *crush’d* and *o’erworn*,’ (LXIII.)
and—

‘Lilies that *fester* smell far worse than weeds.’ (xciv.)
In the first instance, we feel the impression of Time’s

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action with a fresh, nervous vividness; in the second, the striking impression of 'fester' cuts sharply across the conventional associations of 'lilies' in a manner that is purely individual. Under the stress of such personal emotion, the fashionable weaving of word-patterns is transformed into a vivid use of ambiguity, by which Shakespeare is enabled to develop the most complex attitudes in a relatively small space. It is probable that the linguistic discipline imposed by the Sonnet form upon Shakespeare's natural Elizabethan exuberance was a decisive factor in the formation of his poetic mastery. It made him associate compression with depth of content to a degree unparalleled in English (although similar qualities distinguish the work of Donne and other of his contemporaries), and so gave both point and intensity to the development of personal feeling.

These considerations are so important that it is worth taking a typical Sonnet to show how what might have been mere misplaced ingenuity becomes a pregnant poetic device:

'When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutor'd youth,
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppress'd.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say I not that I am old?
O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not to have years told:
Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be.' (cxlviii.)

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The situation announced in the first two lines is, at bottom, the lover's conventional complaint against the faithlessness of the beloved; but the development is anything but conventional. The transition from convention is marked by fresh linguistic subtlety, seen most obviously in the use of the word 'lie'. The double meaning beneath this word is clear in the final couplet; it implies not only conscious deception, but also a lying together as man and mistress. The point, however, lies less in the ambiguity than in its justification, which is not in any way verbal or scholastic, but rather a question of the nature of the experience to be conveyed. The play upon the word 'lie', in fact, enabled Shakespeare to state two emotions, contradictory yet simultaneous, both implicit in one event. The lying together, which is from one point of view the fulfilment of love, is none the less based on mutual falsity, for reasons which are made clear in the rest of the Sonnet. These reasons are faithlessness, covered by concealment on the part of the mistress, and age and disillusionment on the part of the lover. Shakespeare's use of ambiguity in this poem is justified by the precision and subtlety of his thought, or, more exactly, of the analysis of his experience. A line like:

'I do believe her, though I know she lies'

calls for an exactitude of thinking and feeling that a modern reader does not readily associate with emotional intensity. It is a type of poetry which justifies ambiguity, because its subtlety is balanced by its content, because it is able to gather the divergent possibilities of a single situation into the unifying

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framework of a realized convention.

Development in the handling of words and verse implies development in personal experience. Shakespeare's subtlety of language in the Sonnets was occasioned by profoundly personal interests, though not necessarily or even probably of the type favoured by the promoters of various biographical theories. The nature of these interests is indicated by the very choice of the Sonnet form. The Sonnet, of course, is essentially a love poem, and Shakespeare's most mature exercises in the form contain a highly individual analysis of the nature of human relationships in love. They represent, in fact, the first exploration of themes which will later be realized in the great series of tragedies from *Troilus and Cressida* to *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Love in the Sonnets means the traditional union of the poet with his mistress. This union, if consummated, should express itself in terms of fertility and natural increase; the opening sequence is especially full of references to planting and husbandry in connection with love:

'For where is she so fair whose unear'd womb
Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?' (III.)¹

But the Sonnets are less concerned with this consummation than with the thwarting of these natural and beneficent instincts by shortcomings inherent in the very quality of 'blood', or passion. Human passion, according to Shakespeare's mood in the later Sonnets, is inevitably vitiated by inconstancy:

¹ Compare Lucio in *Measure for Measure*:

'... even so her plenteous womb
Expresseth his full *tilth* and *husbandry*.' (I. iv.)

not, however, by the conventional inconstancy of the earlier sonneteers, but by a vice felt to be inseparable from the nature of passion itself. The subject of practically every Sonnet that has any claim to individuality is this insistent thwarting of the desire for unity and fertility:

‘Let me confess that we two must be twain,
Although our individual loves are one...’ (xxxvi.)

This frustration, we have said, is felt to be a *necessary* flaw at the heart of passion; and this flaw is identified in the Sonnets with the action of impersonal and destructive Time.

The sense of the hostility of Time is fundamental, not only to the Sonnets, but to the plays of this period in Shakespeare’s career.¹ The theme, indeed, was a commonplace of the age; it was associated with the Platonizing philosophy adopted by the court poets, and with the religious ‘pessimism’ of mediaeval tradition. In the Sonnets, however, the newer attitude prevails. Natural fear of the action of Time is not balanced by Christian morality, by any Catholic sense of the significance as well as the inevitability of death. Renaissance feeling regarded Time as the enemy and solvent of personal experience, which it wears remorselessly into insentience; Shakespeare gave this feeling magnificent expression in his—

‘Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion’s paws,’
where the epithet ‘devouring’, which belongs naturally to the lion, is transferred to Time, thus creating a very subtle balance of emotions. The lion naturally

¹ See Chapter IV.

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raises associations of splendid life and activity; but the transfer of ‘devouring’ suggests that all this activity is merely self-consuming, a wearing-down of life into pure annihilation. The verb ‘blunt’ shows the typical sensing of the intangible in terms of the life of the finger-tips; it only makes more intense by contrast the life which is subdued to the blunting action of Time.

Time, then, dominates experience. It introduces the ‘canker’ (the word is a fine example of Shakespeare’s individual use of conventional sonneteering language) into the union of love, which demands as a necessary condition of its happiness an unattainable eternity. Under the action of Time, the natural fertility of love becomes an attempt, which is ultimately futile, to prolong life in the persons of its issue:

‘As fast as thou shalt wane, so fast thou growest
In one of thine, from that which thou departest;
And that fresh blood which youngly thou bestowest
Thou mayst call thine when thou from youth convertest.’

(xi.)

The emphasis is less on the ‘growing’ and the ‘fresh blood’ than on the ‘departing’ and the decline from youth; or, more precisely, Shakespeare’s concise and closely reasoned style binds both elements together in a single but declining process. The moment of keen living in rich maturity is felt to be intensely desirable; but its very attainment is also part of the process of its subjugation to Time. Shakespeare’s awareness of this necessity is the cause of the bitterness of so many of his Sonnets. Since love, although so desirable, is vain, it becomes vicious

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and repellent; its very value only makes it more potent to corrupt:

'Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.' (xciv.)

The action of Time becomes associated, in the poet's mind, with the corruption and inconstancy of 'the flesh', as though one necessarily implied the other. The intensity of the language in the most personal Sonnets implies the revolt of experience against the disintegrating force of Time.

We are now in a position to see that Shakespeare's use of ambiguity in the Sonnets is the product of a state of personal experience. The final ambiguity lies in experience itself, in the simultaneous fulfilment and destruction of the values of human life by Time; it depends, not upon a verbal interest, but upon an emotional situation. This situation is central to an understanding of Shakespeare. The great tragedies form a single, continuous process occupied in the resolution of it; and each stage in this resolution is implicit in a further organization of verse and language. From *Troilus and Cressida* to *Antony and Cleopatra* there is a development from ambiguity, which expresses a clash within experience, to a fully organized verse, which implies a harmonious ordering of experience and the fullest realization of Shakespeare's art.

CHAPTER FOUR

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THE PROBLEM PLAYS

I

THE verse of *Troilus and Cressida* is marked by a type of feeling which separates it at once from the early plays; and this feeling might be described as an infiltration into the play of the preoccupations which were receiving simultaneous expression in the Sonnets. The passage in which Troilus takes leave of Cressida demands a response different in kind from anything we have yet seen:

CRESSIDA: And is it true that I must go from Troy? . . .
Is it possible?

TROILUS: And suddenly; where injury of chance
Puts back leave-taking, justles roughly by
All time of pause, rudely beguiles our lips
Of all rejoindure, forcibly prevents
Our lock'd embrasures, strangles our dear vows
Even in the birth of our own labouring breath;
We two, that with so many thousand sighs
Did buy each other, must poorly sell ourselves
With the rude brevity and discharge of one.
Injurious time now with a robber's haste
Crams his rich thievery up, he knows not how;
As many farewells as be stars in heaven,
With distinct breath and consign'd kisses to them,
He fumbles up into a loose adieu,
And scants us with a single famish'd kiss,
Distasted with the salt of broken tears.' (iv. iv.)

The new feeling is clearly connected with the verbal

intricacy of the speech, an intricacy which is felt to be the result of conscious experiment to a degree that would never be tolerated in the mature tragedies. The experience behind it is tremendously rich, endlessly elaborate, but the ordering of it is not equal to the complexity. The adverse action of Time upon the parting lovers is represented by an astonishing number of verbs—‘puts back’, ‘justles roughly by’, ‘rudely beguiles’, ‘forcibly prevents’, ‘strangles’—but the emotion does not *develop*, does not acquire added coherence in the course of its expression. It remains simply a long and acutely sensed effort to express a single moment of conflicting feeling. It belongs, in fact, to a period in Shakespeare’s art in which the keenness of his apprehension of certain elements of experience (already for the most part indicated in the Sonnets) was not accompanied by a corresponding sense of order, of significance, within the complexity of his imagery. We shall see that order and significance gradually developing with the growing mastery of Shakespeare’s art.

None the less, although unsatisfactory, the experience behind *Troilus* is highly individual. In each of the verbs of parting which we have just collected there is an element of harsh and hostile physical contact. This laborious feeling is not accidental, not a product of inadequate poetic equipment struggling for expression; it conveys its full meaning only in the light of the poignant thinness of the love-imagery in the same speech. Troilus, as in every other similar speech of his, can only express his passion in images that are intense, but airy and essentially bodiless. Love is felt to be ‘rich’ and fit to be mentioned with

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the 'stars of heaven'; but it can be expressed only in terms of 'sighs', of 'laboured *breath*', in the hurried breathlessness of 'distinct *breath* and con-sign'd kisses', and in the intensely palated but transitory delicacy of 'Distasted with the salt of broken tears'. Opposed to this 'airy', pathetic passion we feel the full brunt of the senses in every phrase that stresses parting; 'roughly', 'rudely', 'forcibly', time and hostile circumstance undermine the 'brevity' of love. Most noticeably of all, the 'locked embrasures', which should normally convey the intensity of physical union in love, are felt only as a vain effort to snatch a moment's union in the face of events which are forcibly drawing the lovers apart. Moreover, the keen, nervous contrasts upon which the whole passage depends make us feel that the parting caused by external circumstance is only subsidiary to a certain weakness inherent in passion itself. The ideal, which is perfect union, exists and is intensely felt, but is as light as 'breath' or 'air'; and the bodies through whose union alone this intensity can be gained, are always, while they are united, 'labouring' against a tendency to part, to be separate. Their 'labour', thus frustrated, issues in nothing more tangible than 'breath'. Throughout *Troilus*, the elements making for separation are too strong for those which desire union; and 'injurious time' is the process by which separation is born out of desired union.

We can now see why *Troilus* is so full of imagery of taste.¹ In the same scene, Cressida

¹ Miss Spurgeon, among others, notes this fact in her book on *Shakespeare's Imagery*.

describes her sorrow thus:

' Why tell you me of moderation?
 The grief is fine, full, perfect, that I taste,
 And violenteth in a sense as strong
 As that which causeth it.' (iv. iv.)

Taste is a sense that is at once luxurious, delicate, and transient; also it can be connected, more grossly, with digestion and the functioning of the body. All these things were relevant to Shakespeare's purpose. The image expresses the refined beauty of the emotion, but also its essential weakness. It reacts to grief as ' perfectly ' (the word is Cressida's) as to love, and its happiness is transient; its very intensity depends upon the fact that it is passing. It expresses, in fact, a bodiless ideal, and its converse is seen in the scurrilous Thersites and the Greek cynics. For the refined taste-images of the Trojan camp become, in the mouths of the Greeks, clogged, heavy references to digestion. Thersites has ' mastic jaws ', and Achilles calls him ' my cheese, my digestion '; whilst Agamemnon tells Patroclus that Achilles' virtues—

' like fair fruit in an unwholesome dish
 Are like to rot untasted.' (ii. iii.)

In fact, that sense which expresses the related intensity and lightness of Trojan passion (are not the Trojans fighting to preserve the fruit of Paris' lust?) becomes in the Greeks a symbol of inaction and distemper, out of which issue the boils, ' the botchy core ' of Thersites' disgust.

The mood of Troilus turns, then, upon a discrepancy between ideal and fact, between the intensity and inadequacy of passion under its development in Time. This division in individual relationships

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is extended to a similar one in the two camps of war. The cleft between Greeks and Trojans is dominated by the same conditions which overrule the love of Troilus for Cressida. This linking of the personal to the general issue is a notable experiment; it suggests how far Shakespeare's conception of the drama had moved away from a mere impersonal unrolling of events. The dramatist is becoming fully alive in his creation, penetrating and moulding every element of it to his own purpose.

The two camps are differentiated by a clear demarcation of imagery. A different quality is given to the imagery in either case, although the differences are felt to diverge within the limits of a common way of feeling. The Trojans share the fragile intensity of Troilus, which we have already noted. They are deeply concerned with honour and the idealism of love, and Hector shows the virtues of war which are so noticeably absent from the bulky Ajax and the graceless Achilles. Typical of them all is the speech in which Troilus defends the continuation of the war:

‘ But, worthy Hector,
She is a theme of honour and renown;
A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,
Whose present courage may beat down our foes,
And fame in time to come canonize us.’ (II. ii.)

Yet, having allowed for the grace in the Trojan idealism, it remains light and insubstantial. Troilus' victory over Hector at the council in which it is decided to continue the war is based upon a rejection of ‘crammed reason’, which he equates typically with the heavy clogging of healthy physical pro-

cesses; we have already seen the significance of this insistence upon the 'digestive element'. Troilus' reasoning, indeed, is pitiful and ignores Hector's insistence that all this 'honour'¹ is directed to the defence of Helen, whose worth had been destroyed by the manner in which she was stolen from Menelaus; even Paris admits 'the soil of her fair rape', and Shakespeare's choice of adjective when he tells us that her 'youth and freshness' 'made *stale* the morning' is very revealing. The juxtaposition of 'fair' and 'soil', 'freshness' and 'stale' is vital to the whole play.

The Greeks are very different; in their camp we find the staleness which Trojan 'honour' tried to ignore. Where the Trojans rejected reason in favour of action, the Greeks accept reason and are reduced to inaction. Their continual ratiocination leads to a complete overthrow of 'degree'; they are completely unable to turn council into united action. Whilst Agamemnon, Nestor, and Ulysses scheme and discuss, Ajax and Achilles 'fust' (the word is typical) out of action; the hand that executes is out of touch with the 'still and mental parts' that contrive the conduct of the war. Ulysses' famous speech on order reduces the whole question to a rebellion of passion, or 'appetite', against the impotence of reason:

'Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into *appetite*,
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last *eat up himself*.' (I. iii.)

¹ We know already what Falstaff thought of 'honour' in relation to political and military action.

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The association of 'appetite' with 'blood' or uncurbed desire has a long mediaeval ancestry and is a commonplace in Elizabethan moral writing. It gives new force to Shakespeare's expression of love and emotion in terms of taste. The abstract argument on 'degree' reduces itself finally to an intuition of self-consuming passion. The Greek 'body' is manifestly out of order, and its disorder produces Thersites' scabs and boils. The Trojans sought to ignore the deficiencies of passion in a bodiless 'idealism'; the Greeks, quite incapable of idealism, are weighed down by all that the Trojans tried to forget. Both parties are bound together by the occasion of their quarrel; as Thersites says—'all the argument is a cuckold and a whore'. Troilus, in one magnificent phrase, sums up the *crux* from which the subtle contradictions of this play draw their interest—

'This is the monstruosity in love, lady, that the will is infinite and the execution confined, that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit.' (III. ii.)

The 'infinity' sought by the will is the idealistic love of Troilus, which neglects the wearing action of Time and the related inability of bodily passion to live up to purely abstract ideals of love and honour; and the very 'boundlessness' of the desire, when it encounters the limits imposed by Time and the human body to which it feels enslaved, turns to the clogged inertia of Achilles and the endless self-scrutiny of the Greek camp.

In their various ways, the critics of *Hamlet* agree that its subject is a frustration. Hamlet's speculations on action proceed from a flaw in Shakespeare's personal experience which he was unable to project into a dramatic sequence adequately corresponding to it. This is the key to all the critical questions; a frustration like that of *Troilus*, like that of *Hamlet*, can never make a totally coherent play, because it implies that experience is not mastered, not dominated by the poet's creative activity. *Hamlet* is a 'problem' play precisely because Shakespeare is still struggling to reduce to order a whole group of disturbing impressions, to give them ordered significance in a balanced work. That is the impression that remains when due weight has been given to the attempts of Prof. Dover Wilson and other modern scholars to 'clear up' the play.

The difficulty of *Hamlet* is largely due to the fact that the commonplace Elizabethan revenge theme, already popularized by Kyd, does not lend itself naturally to the subtle experience which Shakespeare tried to make it express. Revenge implies swift action and the remorseless shedding of blood. It thrives on an undeveloped taste for melodrama; the one thing not easily squared with it is subtle feeling issuing in prolonged *inaction*. The critics, realizing this, have often attributed to Hamlet scruples, delicacies of feeling, which are not demonstrably present in the play and which were alien to the Elizabethan mind. It is much more natural to assume that Shakespeare took over a long-established

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popular plot and sought to instil into it the obscure personal feelings already at work in *Troilus* and the Sonnets. But these feelings were not as closely fitted as they might have been to the given plot. As Shakespeare develops into full maturity, we shall find a growing submission of his material to personal needs; but this implies precisely that full control of experience which we do not feel in *Hamlet*. *Hamlet*, we have said, turns essentially upon a frustration, upon an experience which is more intense than ordered or coherent; and such an experience cannot mould a plot perfectly to its needs. The verse and the construction of *Troilus* are clearly experimental; they do not, like *Macbeth*, imply an immediate and natural fusion of theme and emotion in a finished work of art. And *Hamlet* is a story, chosen at least in part out of external considerations, in which an intensely personal feeling makes itself felt; but this feeling is unable to assume complete control, partly because of its own incomplete development, and partly on account of an imperfectly judicious choice of plot. — The character of Hamlet, in short, is not perfectly fitted to his actions.

It is more important, however, to realize that *Hamlet* is a great deal more than a repetition of *Troilus*. The thwarting of action by self-criticism which connects it with the development of disease within the human organism is indeed common to Hamlet and the Greek camp. Fortinbras' attack on Poland becomes:

‘the imposthume of much wealth and peace,
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
Why the man dies’; (iv. iv.)

the feeling of this could be paralleled from Ulysses' speeches. But the advance in *Hamlet* is apparent in its more dramatic quality, and in its successful creation of character. Hamlet's soliloquies are far less 'rationalized' than Ulysses' discussions. The laborious machinery of ratiocination is replaced by subtle and truly dramatic shifts of feeling. In the 'To be or not to be' speech, Hamlet's contrasted moods are *felt* in the movement of the verse, in language that reflects through the senses the delicate relation of thought to emotion. New resources of language are being brought into action; we feel the sharp immediacy of the vernacular ('To *grunt* and *sweat* under a weary life') contrasted with the remote, delicate Latinity of 'quietus' and 'consummation'. The conflicts in Hamlet's mind are no longer arguments, but states of experience in which sense and thought are subtly fused in the study, not of an idea, but of a character.

The mention of character suggests another new development in *Hamlet*. The divisions of *Troilus* are felt to be rather 'metaphysical' than human. The central clash of feeling is between human love and impersonal, destructive Time, and the love of Troilus for Cressida is felt as a light, almost a disembodied aspiration. These 'metaphysical' divisions are still capable of neat ordering into two camps, although, as we have seen, Shakespeare provides links between the opposed sides and brings them together in a common experience. In *Hamlet*, however, the contradictions underlying Shakespeare's poetry at this period are brought into one character, so that their full complexity is more immediately realized.

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The greater poetic mastery I have just noted brings with it more dramatic power; and both are based upon a development of personal experience. The central problem is still the problem of action, as in *Troilus*; but *Hamlet* shows us a more subtle Shakespeare more fully engaged in the exploration of it.

Hamlet's concern with action is most noticeably developed in his meditations upon the martial enterprise of Fortinbras (iv. iv.). It is essential to realize that he regards action as natural to the rational and undivided personality; it is the mark of 'god-like reason' in man, the chief sign of his superiority over the 'beast', whose only concern is 'to sleep and feed'. There is no question of the rightness or otherwise of revenge. Hamlet's task chiefly interests Shakespeare in so far as it is an act which requires the union of purpose and feeling in a harmonious personality. But it is precisely this union which Hamlet lacks. In his own inaction, he continues to envy Fortinbras ('a most delicate and tender prince' —we can feel the lightness, the spontaneity of the verse in contrast to the speaker's own clogged doubts), but the Norwegian enterprise is soon exposed to criticism. If the soldiers are moved by 'divine ambition', it is none the less significant that they are 'puffed' by this ambition; the word suggests something vain and inflated, so that we are prepared to see them absurdly 'making mouths at the invisible event', and all for a mere 'egg-shell'.

So far the criticism clearly follows the lines of Falstaff's remarks on 'honour', but the next sentence contains an ambiguity which implies a further

development of Shakespeare's feeling:

11

'Rightly to be great
 Is not to stir without great argument,
 But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
 When honour's at the stake.'

The two statements here made have the appearance of a noble and consistent attitude based on 'honour', but they are actually in virtual contradiction. Reason does not allow a man to act except upon 'great argument', but honour based on natural feeling insists that it is right and noble to act 'greatly' even when reason feels that the ground for action is an inadequate 'straw'. This dilemma gives a fuller meaning to the opening lines:

'What is a man,
 If his chief good and market of his time
 Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
 Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and god-like reason
 To fust in us unused.'

The argument seems simple enough, but the imagery which expresses it suggests rather a conflict of feeling than the triumphant conclusion to a process of reasoning. The sense of man's nobility, his 'large discourse' and 'god-like reason', is balanced by 'sleep and feed' (we are reminded of the food-imagery of *Troilus*) and still more by 'beast' and 'fust'. The intensity implicit in these words forbids us to pass them by; they are the key to the speech. Hamlet desires to see act and reason fused in a 'god-like' union. But reason only convinces him of the ignobility and baseness of action; he has to choose

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between action, which is natural and in itself desirable but as 'gross as earth', and reason, which is in itself 'divine' but leads in his divided state merely to stagnation.

Hamlet's reason leads him to a sense of the vanity and even the repulsiveness of action. We might add that action is habitually conceived of in terms of the flesh rebelling against the reason that should control and direct it. In *Troilus* the flesh makes itself felt only in separation, in the frustration of a 'boundless',¹ disembodied desire. In *Hamlet*, this subsidiary presence of the flesh is in process of becoming a fundamental element in all experience. Hamlet's reason is divorced from the natural action of the flesh, and so it turns upon the flesh with loathing: 'I say, we will have no more marriages. . . . To a nunnery, go!' To grasp the full intensity of this, we must be aware that 'nunnery', in popular Elizabethan speech, could mean 'brothel'; the word unites the ideal of chastity and the fact of promiscuity in a single complex feeling. The same awareness of the flesh accounts for Hamlet's revulsion from his mother's 'incest':

‘Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron’s bones,
To flaming youth left virtue be as wax
And melt in her own fire: proclaim no shame
When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn
And reason panders will.’ (III. iv.)

The sense of the flesh is here immediate, personal, as never in *Troilus*; the immediacy is felt in new

¹ See p. 57.

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resources of language, in a subjugation of that sonnet artifice which the earlier play never quite loses. Reason, which one side of Hamlet's nature wishes to see allied to the natural man in action, is driven to a loathing of all bodily function; it develops into a revulsion, itself pervertedly sensuous, against the senses. This feeling issues everywhere in a bitter preoccupation with corruption: 'The sun *breeds* maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion'. The mention of 'god' reminds us of 'god-like reason' which serves, in Hamlet's eyes, only to pander to the lust-inflamed will.

Hamlet's reason, then, is divorced by an unbridgeable loathing from its natural roots in the complete personality. Thus divorced, it can only spend itself in empty 'dreams' (as in the verbal duel with Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern), and these 'dreams' become 'bad dreams' by being contained within the 'prison', not only of Denmark, but of the 'world'; the prison, in short, of sensible experience dependent upon the flesh. So Hamlet's dreams (which are here profoundly influenced by Montaigne) tend to a nostalgia for death, for release from all—

'. . . the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to.'

But even into the desire for suicide there enters the keen nervous apprehension of 'the bare bodkin', the quick reaction of the senses rendered only more acute by the thought of annihilation. Even 'reason' in *Hamlet* is dominated by the overwhelming keenness of the senses; even repulsion expresses itself in abnormal sensual intensity. The 'frustration' of

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the play consists in the inability to organize this life, to unite it with 'reason' in action. For that unity we have to wait until *Antony and Cleopatra*.

3

I have suggested that the significance of *Hamlet* consists largely in its more direct awareness of the flesh as an inseparable part of human experience; and it is precisely the flesh that dominates *Measure for Measure*. Once more, the verse of the play has an intensely individual quality; the keen, almost unnatural sensitivity of *Hamlet* is subordinated to a supple bareness, which only occasionally gives way to the fullness of emotional expression.

‘Our natures do pursue,
Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,
A thirsty evil: and when we drink we die.’ (I. ii.)

The apparent directness of this is capable of sustaining the weight of the moral contradiction upon which the whole play turns. The ‘thirsty evil’ is that called elsewhere ‘lust’ or ‘liberty’, and mankind, in pursuing it, is driven by a need as ‘proper’ and natural to it, as the need to satisfy thirst; yet the very satisfaction of this thirst leads to a poisoning of the moral nature. The flesh, in short, is at once natural to life and bears within it the seed of death. Shakespeare’s presentation of Vienna is nothing more than an expansion of this issue. The life of the city is based upon the natural order uncurbed by any reference to the moral law; the Duke himself, we are told, had withdrawn into the cultivation of his personal interests, and had allowed the common life to

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develop in accordance with its own instincts. The result has been an unchecked spread of what the moral law condemns as 'vice'; and events have shown this 'vice' to be a normal development inseparable from the flesh. So natural is it that many people in Vienna depend upon it for their livelihood; Pompey, the bawd, sums up their case with undeniable force when questioned by Escalus, the representative of justice:

ESCALUS: How would you live, Pompey? By being a bawd? What do you think of the trade, Pompey? Is it a lawful trade?

POMPEY: If the law would allow it, sir.

ESCALUS: But the law will not allow it, Pompey; nor it shall not be allowed in Vienna.

POMPEY: Does your lordship mean to geld and splay all the youth of the city? (ii. i.)

Escalus insists upon law; but Pompey's first reply raises the questions: Upon what is this law based? Is there any reason why what is now described as 'unlawful' should not be called 'lawful'? He suggests, in fact, that Escalus's 'law' is out of touch with the life of Vienna, which regards bodily passion as natural to man, and Pompey's function as a necessary adjunct to social life.

That is one side of the question. On the other hand, Escalus's indignation against all that Pompey stands for is clearly justified. Unrestrained passion, founded although it is upon nature, yet leads to disease both in the individual and in society. Vienna is undermined by decay, and the imagery of venereal disease dominates Shakespeare's presentation of its life. The citizens, and especially Lucio, take their

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corruption for granted and jest over it; but there can be no question of Shakespeare's seriousness beneath their jokes. The disease and the natural function are inextricably involved.

Measure for Measure, then, is obviously a 'moral' play, and in its 'moral' preoccupation we can trace a development from the mood of *Hamlet*. 'Law', as represented by Escalus and other ministers of justice, is clearly connected with 'reason' in the earlier play; it is 'reason' made more personal, more immediately realized, in answer to the growing feeling for what we have called the flesh. We have noted the rise of this feeling in *Hamlet*, but it is still to some extent accidental to that play; it is still compatible there with a fairly abstract 'reason', although it is precisely the straining of this compatibility that makes the play at once so difficult and so individual. In *Hamlet*, references to the flesh are invariably references of loathing, as though its only activity was to disrupt the abstract perfection implied in the control of 'reason'. There is little sense of that rightness and necessity of passion which is so stressed in the story of Claudio and Julia. Even Lucio, the common Viennese prodigal, hallowed by sexual disease, has a fresh intuition of the beauty of fertility:

'Your brother and his lover have embraced:
As those that feed grow full,—as blossoming time,
That from the seedness the bare fallow brings
To teeming foison,—even so her plenteous womb
Expresseth his full tilth and husbandry.' (I. iv.)

The writing of such a speech implies new possibilities in Shakespeare's art. Not only are various of its images of fertility vastly developed in *King Lear* and

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later plays, but the very movement of the verse is more rich and complex in the command of words behind ‘seedness’ and ‘plenteous womb’, in the concentration that can use both ‘feed’ and ‘husbandry’ to express the fertility of passion. The abstract note of fertility in the Sonnets is here given body, a new content and a new life.

This new content in *Measure for Measure* is most easily realized in the great scene (III. i.) when the disguised Duke and Isabella bring Claudio the news of Angelo’s decision. Throughout the scene, there is a subtle shift of feeling from the Duke’s death-nostalgia (whose origin is one with the Montaigne-like mood of Hamlet) to its opposite—that is, to Claudio’s keenly-sensed desire for life. Even in the Duke’s first speech, where the feeling for death is most intense, we feel the horror of the—

‘soft and tender fork
Of a poor worm.’

This horror can be paralleled in *Hamlet*. So much can hardly be said of the way in which Isabella’s attempt to minimize the pangs of death turns into an acute realization of the actual *nervous* ‘pang’ of dying:

‘The sense of death is most in apprehension;
And the poor beetle that we tread upon,
In corporal sufferance finds a pang as great
As when a giant dies.’

Clearly, this is no sort of argument at all. It is *life* that is being stressed, not death; so that we are ready for Claudio’s most famous speech, where a magnificent series of contrasted images makes us feel ‘sensible warm motion’ in full revolt against ‘cold

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'obstruction' and the 'kneaded clod' of decay. These images are worth detailed study,¹ because they reveal, as I have suggested in dealing with a former speech, a new control of blank verse over a far more complex field of imagery. The texture of the verse, rich and vastly allusive, marks a widening of personal experience—in fact, all that I have tried to describe as the full awareness of the part played by the flesh in the human personality.

This new insistence on the flesh, however, raises the problem of conduct. The abstract 'reason' of *Hamlet* was incompatible with the flesh because it had no contact with it; as soon as real feeling, real passion broke in, it had to be replaced by the practical curb of 'law'. For natural passion brought Vienna not only fertility, but disease and rife disorder. 'The needful bits and curbs to headstrong weeds' had to be reimposed; the problem was how to impose them without destroying the natural richness and fertility of human passion.

Angelo, the Duke's deputy, and Isabella both have their own way of imposing 'law' upon the flesh; and both are found to be inadequate. Isabella retires into a nunnery; but when she becomes concerned in her brother's fate she shows a striking lack of human sympathy. The problem set before her—to surrender her virginity to buy her brother's life from Angelo—Shakespeare is not concerned to solve; he merely gives us two opposed attachments, both right, and both involved in contradiction by an evil quite beyond Isabella's control. But, granted that the

¹ There is an interesting analysis of the whole passage in F. R. Leavis' *Revaluation* (Chatto & Windus, 1936), p. 226.

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dilemma is beyond any perfect solution, Isabella shows no understanding of the natural root of Claudio's sin ('of the seven deadly it is the least', he pleads, with equal emphasis on 'deadly' and 'least'). She turns on her brother in his misery:

‘Take my defiance!
Die, perish! Might but my bending down
Reprise thee from thy fate, it should proceed:
I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
No word to save thee.’ (iii. i.)

The very emphasis suggests the inadequacy of Isabella's mortification; control comes too easily to a person who can so easily ignore the natural roots of feeling. Isabella is one example of 'law' and nature failing to meet.

Angelo is a still clearer example. As the established instrument of authority, he is ready to force 'law' upon Vienna; but he is dangerous in his ignorance of the deep issues involved. His ignorance is much more dangerous than that of Isabella on account of the latent sensuality whose power he has never felt. Coming into contact with Isabella, when she approaches him to plead for Claudio's life, this sensuality comes to the surface and expresses itself in a betrayal of the very purity which he has hitherto upheld:

‘. . . it is I
That, lying by the violet in the sun,
Do as the carrion does, not as the flower,
Corrupt with virtuous season. Can it be
That modesty may more betray our sense
Than woman's lightness? Having waste ground enough,
Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary,
And pitch our evils there?’ (ii. ii.)

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The opening lines are clearly related to the 'god kissing carrion' of *Hamlet*. The compression of the syntax is a sign of the moral pressure felt in the speech; Shakespeare does not pause to develop the comparison between 'I' and the 'carrion', he gives them simultaneous existence in a single compressed image. The 'carrion' implicit under the 'modesty' is breaking out in a perverted form far worse than the evils it sought to destroy.

Measure for Measure provides no 'solution' to its crucial problem—the relation of 'reason', now regarded as 'law' or moral control, to the natural development of passion. 'Solution', of course, is not the right word. Shakespeare was elaborating a state of experience, not answering an abstract question; and this state was essentially a strife, a disharmony still far from poetic resolution. 'Solutions' in Shakespeare are not intellectual statements; they are only apprehensible in a gradual harmonizing of imagery, to which the functions of plot and character become increasingly knitted. The Duke is regarded, up to a point, as the controller of the action, and so as a possible source of harmony; Angelo refers to 'the power divine' with which he has looked under his disguise into the inmost motives of his subjects. But the Duke does not really offer solutions; rather, he is steeped in the mystery and obscurity so typical of the play. To Lucio he is 'the old fantastical duke of *dark corners*', and Escalus tells us that he has always been 'one that, above all other *strifes*, contended especially to know himself'. This description is significant. Both Angelo and Isabella had failed in self-knowledge, in awareness of the complex knot

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of good and evil which centres on human passion. A law-giver, then, must be aware of this complexity, must seek to harmonize the natural sources of experience with the moral 'law'. In *Measure for Measure*, however, this knowledge is still a *strife* rather than a harmony; the goodness of human inclination, which must be recognized to attain moral maturity, contains also a seed of evil which the moral 'law' must uproot. The Duke's conviction of 'strife', of darkness, dominates his character, and makes suggestions of co-ordination seem insignificant.

Such suggestions can be found. In Act IV there is a trace of what was later to become the resolution of conflicts in terms of harmonized imagery. This suggestion takes the form of a contrast of two sets of images. One is centred on the 'dead midnight' in which the mysterious intrigues of the Duke and Angelo strive for supremacy, whilst Claudio lies under the 'steeled gaoler'. The other expresses itself in a rising series of dawn-images, which become more powerful as the Duke begins to feel his mastery of the situation. It culminates in his great prose speech to the Provost:

'Look, the unfolding star calls up the shepherd. Put not yourself into amazement how these things should be: *all difficulties are but easy when they are known.* . . . Yet you are amazed; but this shall absolutely resolve you. Come away; it is almost *clear dawn.*' (iv. ii.)

But the 'symbolism', if such we may call it, remains elementary. All the forces of life and fertility suggested in Lucio's great speech on Claudio's love¹ are not yet behind it to give it life and adequate con-

¹ Quoted on p. 67.

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tent. This strengthening has yet to grow out of the whole body of the tragedies. The theme of *Measure for Measure* is still the inextricable interdependence of good and evil within human experience as centred in the act of passion. The mature tragedies which follow are to separate the elements within this complexity; this separation will result in a more adequate projection of the individual experience into a plastic and sensitive dramatic form.

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CHAPTER FIVE

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IN the series of great tragedies which follows *Measure for Measure*, we become aware of a more complex and controlled expression of experience. We are no longer dealing with what are called 'problem' plays, in which there is felt to be present an element which is not patient of adequate artistic statement. The language and the verse, indeed, become even more complex, the interrelation of images more far-reaching; but there is no longer that gap, which we must feel in *Hamlet*, between purpose and achievement, between the emotion and the series of events through which it expresses itself. There are even greater riches of experience, but with them greater possibilities of harmony and solution. We pass through *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*, to *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is as clear, lucid, and controlled as *Hamlet*, at the other end of the series, is puzzling, dark, and unmanageable. But one could never have been written without the other.

It is easy to find examples, in the plays of this period, of the extraordinary advance in the mastery of verse which they display. This description of

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Cordelia's grief, taken from *King Lear* (iv. iii.), will serve:

‘ . . . patience and sorrow strove
Who should express her goodliest. You have seen
Sunshine and rain at once: her smiles and tears
Were like a better way: those happy smilets
That play'd on her ripe lip seem'd not to know
What guests were in her eyes; which parted thence
As pearls from diamonds dropp'd.’

One is struck at once by a tremendous extension in the range of imagery at Shakespeare's disposal, an extension, however, which is still traceable back to those first rudimentary complexities of Northumberland's speech in *Henry IV*, Part II.¹ The difference in intensity and organization is the best measure of Shakespeare's emotional growth between the two plays. Cordelia's sorrow is expressed in a whole series of images, few of which have a plain *factual* connection with the scene described; ‘sunshine and rain’, ‘ripe lip’, ‘guests’, ‘pearls’ and ‘diamonds’, are all connected, less on account of any visual impression of Cordelia they may give us, than on account of the sense of value, of richness and fertility which they impart. ‘Sunshine and rain’ leads naturally to the suggestion in ‘ripe’ of the maturing crops, and ‘guests’ hints at the bounty which expresses itself in hospitality; the precious stones of the last line add strength to the same impression from another direction. To grasp the full significance of this pattern of imagery, moreover, one must relate every element in it to the recurrent instances of its use in the rest of the play. ‘Ripe’, for instance,

¹ Quoted on p. 29.

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Macbeth represents, in many ways, a crucial stage in Shakespeare's development, a stage naturally reflected in further subtleties of technique. It is emphatically a play about the relations of good and evil, and these relations are developed in a manner already suggested in *Othello*, but otherwise new in Shakespeare. The plot itself turns, for the first time, upon a clear contrast between two completely opposed orders. Duncan and Malcolm, who both suffer at the hands of Macbeth, are not bound, like Othello, by egoism or folly to the evil which attacks them; rather do they stand over against Macbeth, less as characters than as poetic 'symbols' of order, loyalty, and goodness. The significance of Duncan does not depend upon a character-study; some critics, starting from the Bradleyan method of analysing character, have even found him weak and ineffectual, which was certainly no part of Shakespeare's intention. It depends rather, as we shall see, upon the images of bounty and fertility which surround his kingship, and which give him a 'symbolic' value. The Witches, in the opening scene, introduce us to a situation in which 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'; they prepare us for the entry of evil and disruption into what has been, under Duncan, natural and orderly. The peace of Scotland hangs upon the lawful and beneficent kingship of Duncan. When the evil in Macbeth's nature is stirred to the murder of his rightful king, he introduces both into Scotland and into his own nature a disrupting evil

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which must work itself out through the process it initiates. The play deals with the overthrow of the balance of royalty, with the development of all the evil implicit in that overthrow, and with the restoration of natural order under Duncan's rightful successor. It will be seen from this preliminary outline that Shakespeare is still concerned with the question of 'degree', as expressed by Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*. The infinitely greater poetic mastery of *Macbeth* is the measure of Shakespeare's advance in the organization of experience.

Macbeth's murder of Duncan is a crime against the natural foundations of social and moral order; it is also an attack by the destructive elements in Shakespeare's experience against those which make for unity and untrammelled maturity. Not only is Duncan a man and Macbeth's 'kinsman'; as King, he is the source of all the benefits which flow from his person to the whole state. In his conception of Duncan, Shakespeare turns the feudal idea of kingship to highly individual use. Duncan, as King, is the head of 'a single state of man' (we shall see later the full significance of this image of Macbeth's), whose members are bound into unity by the ties of loyalty. As King, he dispenses riches and graces to all his subjects; the quality of his poetry is above all life-giving, fertile. Note the overflowing emotion expressed in his greeting of Macbeth:

‘ My plenteous joys,
Wanton in fullness, seek to hide themselves
In drops of sorrow.’ (I. iv.)

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His intention to reward Macbeth is expressed in terms of harvest fullness:

‘I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
To make thee full of growing.’ (i. iv.)

Above all, perhaps, we should remember the description of Inverness, with the ‘temple-haunting martlet’ building its ‘pendant bed and procreant cradle’ on the walls. The combination of spring fertility with the ‘delicate air’, which recommends itself ‘nimblly and sweetly’ to the ‘gentle’ senses, is an achievement so richly and delicately compacted as to be new in Shakespeare. It marks the definite ordering of his experience, and the resulting liberation of its full possibilities for life and harmony. The ‘canker’ of frustration which was still eating into Othello’s love is here fully mastered, artistically worked out in the evil of Macbeth; and all the vitality and goodness thus freed find expression in a new imagery of fertility.

There is between Duncan and the loyal Macbeth of the early scenes a relationship rich in honour and fertile in royal bounty. As Duncan’s instrument of war, Macbeth wins two arduous battles and becomes Earl of Cawdor. But no sooner has he heard the prophecy of the Witches than a new quality enters into his meditations, expressing itself in verse of a very different kind. The verse of *Macbeth* is often, at first reading, so abrupt and disjointed that some critics have felt themselves driven to look for gaps in the text. Yet the difficult passages do not look in the least like the result of omissions, but are rather necessary to the feeling of the play. In

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practically every one of Macbeth's speeches there is a keen sense of discontinuity, a continual jolting of the sensibility into disorder and anarchy. Macbeth moves almost continuously in a remarkable nervous tension, in which a very palpable obscurity is suddenly and unexpectedly shot through by strange revelations and terrifying illuminations of feeling. This state is fully significant only in the light of the rich, ordered poetry of Duncan; it is the natural consequence of the murder, the entry of evil both into the individual and the state. The quality of this disturbance should be carefully considered.

Immediately after his first meeting with the Witches, when the thought of evil first enters his head, Macbeth speaks with typical disjointed intensity:

' This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good; if ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor;
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings:
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes to my single state of man that function
Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not! ' (I. iii.)

There is nothing accidental about the telescoping of the syntax in the last few lines; that strange juxtaposition of 'thought' and 'murder' conveys magnificently the birth of the horrible project in the

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tangled chaos of ideas. The rest of the speech conveys even more. It anticipates the whole disturbance of natural 'function', of 'the single state of man', which is implied in the very thought of such a crime; it expresses with magnificent nervous directness the shaking of the foundations of a harmonious personality. The speech is much more than a mere statement of ambiguity within Macbeth's mind. It is a *physical* apprehension of ambiguity, a disordered experience expressing itself in terms of a dislocated functioning. There is a tremendous sense of heightened animal feeling about the unfixed hair and the hammering of the heart: And yet, keen as it is, this almost bestial sensitivity is quite meaningless. It introduces unreality even into the fact of murder in a later scene. When Lady Macbeth tries to rouse her husband to a fuller consciousness of himself, she says:

'. . . the sleeping and the dead
Are but as *pictures*; 't is the eye of childhood
That fears a *painted* devil.' (ii. ii.)

Divorced from its proper place in 'the use of nature', the most intense feeling has only a quality of hallucination—this is the full force of words like 'horrible imaginings' and 'fantastical'. Feeling is 'smothered in surmise', and the keen senses are directed only to a muffled fumbling among uncertainties.

The full meaning of the speech should now be clear. The fertile poetry of Duncan, based upon so delicate and so full an organization of the 'gentle'

senses, depends upon a right ordering of the 'single state of man'. Harmony in the individual is balanced by harmony in the Scottish *state* under its lawful King. Macbeth's poetry, however, reflects the result of a wilful breakdown of this single state; and Shakespeare identifies evil with the disrupting of his most harmonious experience. The result is a discontinuity in Macbeth between the senses and the mind, between the mind and the conscience (note how the speech opens with a vain fumbling at the meaning of 'good' and 'evil'), and between these gaps nothing but an intense awareness of their existence. Considered in this way, Macbeth can be related to the whole development of the earlier plays. Its subject is the 'degree' theme of *Troilus and Cressida*, enriched by a new maturity. By the side of this contrast between Duncan and Macbeth, Ulysses' discourse on 'degree' is sluggish and unrealized. Here there is no gap between the statement and its apprehension in terms of nervous experience. Ulysses, on the whole, *tells* us about the breakdown of abstract 'degree', whereas here we *feel* the personality in dissolution, striving in vain to attain coherence. So much greater is Shakespeare's mastery, of the personal ambiguities behind the 'problem' plays.

The connection between *Macbeth* and Shakespeare's previous work becomes clearer once we see that the murder of Duncan results from a movement of the 'blood', of the deeper sources of passion influencing the will. Everybody knows that Lady Macbeth wins her husband over from his scruples; the nature of their relationship is worth a moment's

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consideration. Note how she greets him upon his arrival:

‘Thy letters have transported me beyond
The ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant,’ (I. v.)

and how he responds ecstatically: ‘My dearest love!’ It is precisely this intensity of passion which is turned into a craving for power and issues in murder. To follow the common line of criticism and call this ‘ambition’ is not enough, for ‘ambition’ is an abstraction and this is something that comes, as we have said, from the ‘blood’. Significantly enough, it causes Lady Macbeth to deny her own nature. Her first prayer as her purpose takes shape is ‘unsex me here’, and she follows it by expressing her willingness to kill her own child rather than fail in the action dictated by her blood-impelled craving for power; and, finally, she conquers her own feeling that the dead Duncan resembled her father as he slept. The whole crime, in Ross’s words, is ‘against nature still’. The overthrow of the external royal symbol of order and fruitful action is the result of an overthrow of the harmony of impulse and conscience, ‘blood’ and will; and this naturally produces a disassociation of bodily function, an anarchy in which animal feeling works in an isolation divorced from all control, and so void of continuity and significance.

We have now seen that Macbeth’s crime is a rift in the harmony and richness of experience ‘symbolized’ in Duncan’s rule and realized in his poetry. Such a rift, once it has appeared, has to exhaust its destructive consequences before coherence can be

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restored; and Macbeth's kingship, which is contrasted with Duncan's as 'evil' with 'good', is simply the working-out of the evil upon which it was founded. The contrast with Duncan is fully developed in a series of balanced images. Macbeth's banquet, for example, is set against Duncan's great feast at Inverness, at which he distributed 'great largess' to his thanes and 'shut up in *measureless* content'. The force of 'measureless', and its connection with the whole spirit of Duncan's kingship, should by now be clear. It is significant that Macbeth in his guilt should be absent from this banquet; his meditated crime is the flaw in 'the single state of man' which depends upon loyalty to the throne. If we turn to Macbeth's own banquet after his crowning, we shall find Banquo's ghost breaking in upon loyalty and order; the whole scene is closed by Lady Macbeth's significant words:

' You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting,
With most admired *disorder*.' (iii. iv.)

Note 'disorder'; it is a precise description of what Macbeth's crime lets loose upon Scotland, and of the effects of evil upon his own person. These two 'disorders', the personal and the national, are poetically in the closest connection; they develop together, until both reach their culminating point in the murder of Macduff's family.

The first sign of the disorder within Macbeth is, as we have seen, hallucination and a certain chaotic intensity. As his story proceeds, however, and one sin against conscience and humanity follows another, this intensity is replaced by a mere weary lack of

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feeling; even revulsion gives way to dead insensibility. Every critic has noted the nervous tiredness which comes over Macbeth, until at the end we find that 'unfix my hair' which he uttered in his first disturbance, echoed thus:

'I have almost forgot the taste of fears;
The time has been, my senses would have cool'd
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in't: I have supp'd full with horrors.' (v. v.)

The fact of Macbeth's weariness is much less important than the manner of its expression. Note how the feeling connected with the 'fell of hair' is associated with the cloyed palate and the satiated stomach. Even the disorganized sensibility of the animal, once so keenly felt, is now played out. The murderer continues to act, but his acts are divorced from any desire or feeling, however inhuman. The cruel murder of Macduff's wife and children has behind it none of the intensity which accompanied the killing of Duncan; but it is the logical result of an intensity which overthrew loyalty and replaced it by anarchy.

The last human feeling retained by the murderer is a desire to sleep. Sleep brings with it 'repose', the renewing of the whole man in his rest. Lady Macbeth says—' You lack the season of all natures, sleep': 'the season'—the element that makes life sweet and acceptable, as to the natural taste. The full significance of sleep as a Shakespearian symbol becomes clearer in the later plays, in Lear's regenerating sleep and in Pericles and Leontes; already we find it connected with 'season', and so related in a

very complex manner to the functioning of Duncan's 'gentle senses' (the connection is more precise in *Lear*). By his crime, however, Macbeth has cut himself off from everything natural; and so his sleep, under the palpable 'blanket of the dark' is full of— /

‘the cursed thoughts that nature
Gives way to in repose.’ (II. i.)

To the murderer, sleep offers no refuge from the disordered sensations proper to one who has lost 'his single state of man'. At best, he can connect it, not with the renewal of vitality, but with death, the only release from the meaningless continuation of a life whose content and significance he has murdered:

‘Duncan is in his grave;
After life’s fitful fever he sleeps well.’ (III. ii.)

To suggest, with Santayana, that this phrase sums up Shakespeare's attitude to life (in so far as one can be discovered) is misleading. There is, as we have noted and shall see again, the splendid ordering of experience implicit in the poetry of Duncan and Malcolm. Macbeth's attitude to death cannot be identified with Shakespeare's in this play (something like it is perhaps the most unambiguous feeling in *Hamlet*), though Shakespeare no doubt felt it keenly and persistently. It is rather the product of Macbeth's original crime against loyalty and order in the state, against the harmony and continuity which alone make experience valuable. In murdering Duncan, he murdered the coherence

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of his own life, so that we can expect from him nothing but death.

Macbeth's progress towards anarchy culminates in the killing of Macduff's wife and children, which is the turning-point of the play. It was a murder carried out in full disillusionment, immediately after Macbeth had learnt from the Witches that his hopes of establishing a succession of rightful kings were vain, that his crime had not only 'put rancours in the vessel of his peace', but would not lead to the establishment of a royal line. It also marked the lowest point in Scotland's misery, now so clearly contrasted with her happiness under Duncan; her sorrows daily 'strike heaven in the face', the loyal remnants have fled, and Macduff has even, with unpardonable carelessness as he admits, left his family in the hands of the butcher. Yet, at this moment, Shakespeare introduces the turning-point in a single speech by Ross. Ross is one of those minor characters to whom Shakespeare, in his later plays, sometimes gives the function of a chorus; he comments upon the action, and his speeches are often statements of fact so made that their imagery unites them to the poetic construction of the play. Ross advises Lady Macduff in these words:

' . . . cruel are the times, when we are traitors
And do not know ourselves; when we hold rumour
From what we fear, yet know not what we fear,
But float upon a wild and violent sea
Each way and move. I take my leave of you:
Shall not be long but I'll be here again:
*Things at the worst will cease, or else climb upward
To what they were before.*' (iv. ii.)

The conclusion anticipates the events to follow, Macbeth's overthrow with the recovery of loyalty and 'the single state of man' in the triumph of Malcolm. This scene, in fact, marks the point of balance (that is the effect so finely conveyed in the suspense of 'Each way and move') with just a suggestion of the recovery. It is worth noticing, too, how the opening lines drive home the impression of evil which Macbeth's own speeches have already stressed. The essence of evil, which communicates itself from the usurper to his whole realm, lies in uncertainty, in ignorance of one's own impulses, of the causes of our own actions. It is an uncertainty which has reached such a degree of anarchy that it must 'cease' or else 'climb upward' and return to the former condition under Duncan.

The last Act of *Macbeth* is occupied by this return to the kingship of 'grace'. I use the word advisedly, because it is prominent in some of the last plays (notably *The Winter's Tale*), and because it is the crown of all the images which stress the sweetness and fertility of Duncan's state and of the forces of good throughout the play. It was no accident that Duncan called his martens 'temple-haunting' in the same breath as he opposed to Macbeth's fumbling, blood-smothered senses, the startling purity of his account of Inverness. 'Grace' is the word which Shakespeare uses to express the harmony of 'the single state of man'. It is significant that the loyal elements scattered by Macbeth's tyranny, when they reunite, receive new strength from another holy King—Edward the Confessor. The new Shakespearian 'symbolism' is beneath

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Malcolm's account of the curing of the 'King's evil':

' 'Tis called the evil. . . .

How he solicits heaven,

Himself best knows: but strangely-visited people,

All swoln and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,

The mere despair of surgery, he cures,

Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,

Put on with holy prayers; and 'tis spoken,

To the succeeding royalty he leaves

The *healing benediction*. With this strange virtue

He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,

And sundry blessings hang about his throne,

That speak him full of grace.' (iv. iii.)

The force of this is so clear that I need not enlarge upon it; the explicit reference to the 'evil' and the final word 'grace' tell us who are the 'crew of wretched souls', of whom the Doctor has just spoken. Scotland must be healed and purified by the powers of harmony and reconciliation symbolized in 'grace' and 'benediction'; and the holy Edward imparts to Malcolm the strength necessary for this task.

As Malcolm returns with his army of deliverance, the divisions implicit in evil become clear. In contrast to Edward's healing power, the Doctor at Dunsinane cannot 'minister to a mind diseased', cannot cure the disharmony beneath Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking. 'More needs she the divine than the physician'; the words take us back to Edward's 'healing benediction'. When the actual battle comes, we hear that 'The tyrant's people on both sides do fight', and the terrible Macbeth shrinks to something small and rather absurd

as his fall becomes inevitable. In the words of Angus:

‘ . . . now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.’ (v. ii.)

Before the advancing powers of healing good, evil has shrunk to insignificance. Macbeth is seen to be a puny figure dressed up in an usurped greatness, and we are ready for the final bravado flourish with which he dies after Macduff has stripped him of his false ‘supernatural’ hopes. It is the end of the ambiguity stated by the Witches—‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’. The answer to it is seen in the concluding announcement of the coronation of a King who refers to ‘the grace of Grace’ as his sanction, and is a rightful successor of Duncan: a King, in short, to whom loyalty is properly due, and from whom bounty may be expected to flow.

3

My analysis of *Macbeth* has suggested that Shakespeare’s technique developed, during the course of the tragedies, towards what can only be described as ‘symbolism’. This symbolism, if we are to avoid the crudities of those who seek in Shakespeare’s work various ‘doctrines’ or solutions to more or less abstract problems, needs to be considered through a feeling for the use of poetic imagery evolved in the growing maturity of the plays. The early verse, with its careful rhetorical construction and technical rigidity, is sufficient only to develop a given situation; the freedom of the later work is due to the new desire

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to relate that particular situation to all the other situations contained within the unity of the play, to give them significance as parts of a harmonious experience. That was the achievement implied in the interwoven threads of imagery which we tried to disentangle in *Macbeth*; the Shakespearian image, expanded by a continually growing number of contacts with the surrounding verse, becomes more intimately related to plot and character, until there is no sharp distinction between the action and its 'interpretation' in poetry. A consideration of *King Lear* will show a further development of similar interests, a technique even more reminiscent of the last plays.

The story of *King Lear* turns upon the division introduced into the natural relationships of humanity (and especially into the intimate unity of the family) by the forces of uncontrolled passion. Gloucester's consideration of 'these late eclipses' (I. ii.) emphasizes these divisions by giving them a cosmic background; they are part of an inevitable and universal tendency to anarchy and decay:

'... love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. . . . We have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery and all *ruinous disorders* follow us disquietly to our graves.'

The pessimism of the speech reflects a general mood in Jacobean life, for the drama of these years¹ is full of it; but Shakespeare, as usual, reflects the mood in the light of his own individuality and relates it to interests already developed in earlier plays. He ex-

¹ *Lear* was written about 1607.

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presses it in terms of his preoccupation with 'disorder', using his sense of the disruption of 'degree' in personal experience to illuminate anarchy in the family, in society, in 'nature'. A consideration of the two family groups pre-eminently involved in the tragedy will make this clear.

Shakespeare's choice of the family unit is in itself significant, because it implies a relationship founded most immediately upon 'blood', upon the strongest and most obscure instincts of the personality. This family relationship—and more especially the intimate bond of father and child—makes its first appearance in *Lear*.¹¹ It dominates the plays which follow: *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*, and even *Cymbeline* turn upon a development covering estrangement, loss, and reconciliation within that relationship, and Shakespeare evidently used it to express his sense of the possibilities of disorder and harmony introduced by 'blood' into personal experience.¹² Lear's fatherhood bears a 'symbolic' value similar to that of Duncan's kingship. The family, like the Scottish kingdom, is a 'symbol' of ordered living. The authority of the father is balanced by the love of his children, and their devotion obtains the grace of his benediction, just as Macbeth's loyalty is rewarded by Duncan's bounty; but if this relationship is destroyed by the working of passion on either side, the evil must work itself out, as in *Macbeth*, through sorrow, disruption, anarchy. This development can already be seen in *Lear*. (Old age has weakened the King's self-control in the opening scene, making him the prey of an anger which is definitely rooted in the 'blood'). The splendid pagan

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imagery of the dark places of nature, of the orbs 'from whom we do exist and cease to be', represents the source of his anger against the 'reasonable' Cordelia, represents passion in revolt against control driving the personality to destruction. The effect of his curse is, above all, to disclaim 'propinquity and property of blood', to break bonds which precede reason and order, but upon which the unity of the family depends. The early part of Lear's story is simply an unfolding of the full consequences of this division. When Goneril turns against him, he begs 'nature' to suspend the natural fertility of his own daughter:

'Into her womb convey sterility:
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her.' (I. iv.)

(This curse, which proceeds from passion and calls upon 'nature', the source of instinct and uncontrolled feeling, is none the less an attack on the natural fulfilment of passion; that is the heart of Lear's tragedy. This development is paralleled in his ungrateful daughters. Indeed, father and daughters are to be regarded as complementary aspects of a *single* development within the unity of the family; Lear's crime against his paternity is fitly balanced by his daughter's disregard of all natural feeling, and this leads them logically to turn against one another over Edmund in the furtherance of individual desire. 'Blood', upon which their cruelty is grounded, eventually makes them rivals for the love of the bastard son of Gloucester, and so prepares for their ruin.) Once more, as in *Othello* and *Mac-*

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beth, we see the evil elements of passion working themselves out to their natural conclusion, which is absolute disruption.)

A similar division, also the product of 'blood', explains the parallel tragedy of Gloucester. It is Edmund, the blood-born son, who undoes the bonds of nature by dispossessing the true-born Edgar and driving his own father to blindness and death. This connection of evil with the disruptive force of 'blood' is implicit in Edmund's every action. His first words are a declaration that 'nature' is his 'goddess'; and his sense of the vitality derived from 'the lusty stealth of nature' reminds us, in the intensity which underlies its cynical surface, of Iago's destructive criticism. Shakespeare regards Edmund as a product of Gloucester's own uncontrolled passion; his destruction of the filial bonds of 'nature' is a consequence of the 'natural' manner of his begetting. As Edgar puts it explicitly at the end of the play:

'The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us:
The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes.' (v. iii.)

The 'philosophy', considered in itself, is crude enough, but its bluntness and brutality are essential to the feeling of the play; nothing more refined could fittingly accompany the wolfish brutality of man and nature in the storm scenes. It is the expression of the thought in terms of Shakespeare's personal concern for the unity and harmony of experience that is delicate and subtle. The relations of Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund constitute a study, one of several in *Lear*, of the complexity implied in the term

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'nature'. Edmund's 'natural' bastardizing destroys the still more natural relationship between the father and his true-born son; in the same way, passion, although 'natural' to the full development of man, may yet wreck the harmony of his experience and destroy his peace.¹

Under the pressure of 'blood', then, family and state in *Lear* are brutally disrupted. The process of dissolution culminates in the storm, which is clearly the turning-point of the play. Shakespeare's use of the storm marks a considerable advance in the subjection of dramatic technique to poetic purpose. The external action becomes a perfect reflection of Lear's own condition. Since the storm is only conveyed to us through the words of Lear and his companions, it is necessarily in the closest relationship to their feelings; it serves, so to speak, as an elemental extension of the personal mood. Man and his environment are organically related in the conflicts of a poetic universe.) The conditions to which Lear is exposed are simply the result of the fact that, in Gloucester's words:

'Our flesh and blood is grown so vile, my lord,
That it does hate what gets it.' (ii. iv.)

Human relationships have been completely dissolved, and the state of 'unaccommodated man' is merely that of the beast of prey, adequately expressed in the repeated imagery of the wolf, the fox, and the lion. By the end of the Act, the limits of destruction have been reached, and it is significant that the Fool, whose words have so far provided a grotesque com-

¹ This theme is greatly developed in *The Winter's Tale*: see below, p. 132 onwards.

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ment on Lear's downward progress, now disappears from the play. He accompanies his master to the lowest point in his career, and then leaves him.

At this stage, Shakespeare is faced by an artistic problem of tremendous difficulty—the problem, that is, of balancing the disruption which he had so thoroughly traced in the first part by a harmony corresponding to that of *Macbeth* in the second. The blinding of Gloucester (III. vii.) represents the lowest depth of man's subjugation to the beast; Gloucester's references to 'cruel nails' and 'boarish fangs' indicate the complete overthrow of human feeling. Shakespeare follows it by a kind of lull in the emotional development of the play, in which misery seems to pass into a tired Stoic resignation to the worst; as Edgar puts it:

'The lamentable change is from the best;
The worst returns to laughter.' (iv. i.)

This mood is the only possible transition from the horrors we have just witnessed; and during it we become aware of two new developments. In the first place, the passion which has up to now impelled Goneril to ingratitude and cruelty, to a disregard for the natural bonds of the family, now begins to ruin her own prosperity. She reveals her love for Edmund and her contempt for her husband ('My fool usurps my body'—the physical intensity is noteworthy), whilst Albany, appalled by her bestiality, turns upon her in language that itself suggests the beast:

'Were't my fitness
To let these hands *obey my blood*,
They are apt enough to dislocate and *tear*
Thy flesh and bones.' (iv. ii.)

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It is the development of *Macbeth* repeated; evil, having destroyed the foundations of order upon natural dependence, proceeds to destroy itself.

The second development at this stage is the reappearance of Cordelia, introducing a type of poetry which cannot spring from anything we have yet noted in the play. I have already discussed the nature of Cordelia's grief in the opening pages of this Chapter;¹ it evidently introduces a harmonizing and healing element to balance the cruelty of the earlier developments. The question is, does Shakespeare succeed, or even try to succeed, in relating this element organically to the dissolution of the first three Acts?

A careful reading of *King Lear* leaves no room for doubt that Shakespeare attempted to solve this problem. He was aware of it during his treatment of the storm, and the development of Lear's character in the course of this Act is clearly intended to balance the destruction of human values which accompanies it. Out of Lear's consideration of the pitiable state of 'unaccommodated man' there springs a fresh awareness of his own failings and of human impotence; everyone remembers his awakening to the fact of 'naked' poverty outside Edgar's hovel:

‘O, I have taken
Too little care of this!’ (III. iv.)

It is possible to exaggerate this moral development, misreading into it ideas which are in no sense Elizabethan; but there can be no doubt that the storm completely transforms the quality of Lear's suffering.

¹ See p. 78.

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(From the wounded selfishness of the passion-driven animal in the early scenes we are brought to what we can only call a definite *moral* consciousness of the terrible wound caused by suffering in human nature.) By the end of his wanderings, Lear is moved less by the sense of personal thwarting than by the inexplicable evil in man's passions: 'Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?' It is noteworthy that Lear, almost immediately after asking this question, is ready to fall asleep; his condition, no longer dominated by mere 'blood', has become such that it is ready for the 'balm' of 'broken sinews'; for the first time, there seem to be possibilities of harmony beyond his torture. This development in Lear's nature, indeed, opens new possibilities in the poetic expression of his sufferings: possibilities which are realized in Kent's account of his master's condition after his arrival at Dover:

'A sovereign shame so elbows him: his own unkindness
That stripp'd her from his benediction, turn'd her
To foreign casualties, gave her dear rights
To his dog-hearted daughters: these things sting
His mind so venomously that burning shame
Detains him from Cordelia.' (iv. iii.)

The changed quality of Lear's suffering is reflected in a new type of poetry.) The storm, with its sense of division, of the human body physically torn apart on the rack, or defenceless under the teeth of beasts of prey, is superseded by a pain which is still intense, but which might be the prelude to restoration. Not only is the shame 'sovereign', suggesting a rich and valuable emotion: not only is Lear's past 'unkindness' (in the sense of neglect of kinship)

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opposed to the harmony implied in ‘benediction’, to which he is now feeling his way back: but ‘sting’, ‘venomously’, and ‘burning shame’ suggest the cauterizing of a wound, as though his grief were a necessary preparation for restoration. Read in connection with the overflowing fullness of Cordelia’s grief in the same scene, the speech shows that Shakespeare intends to balance the anarchy and cruelty of the first three Acts by a splendid reconciliation of father and daughter in a natural and harmonious relationship.

Before this reconciliation can take place, however, ‘the eye of anguish’ in Lear has to be closed, and this (as the next scene shows) is to be the work of ‘repose’. Already in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare had used sleep to indicate the renewal of the complete man in his rest; and the Doctor in Cordelia’s camp gives it a similar function. To assist it, Cordelia desires the use of all the ‘unpublished virtues of the earth’, praying that they may spring from her tears; this explicit relation of grief to fertility confirms the new feeling we have noted in Lear’s royal distress. The sorrows into which father and daughter have been plunged by the disruption of ‘nature’s’ bond in the family are to bear fruit in a new relationship of loyalty and ‘benediction’. Even the fact that Lear has been found crowned with ‘the idle weeds’ that grow ‘in our sustaining corn’ suggests the ripeness and fertility that are associated with Cordelia’s camp.

In this way we are led, step by step, towards Lear’s awakening. The scene in which this takes place is from the point of view of Shakespeare’s technique

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the most advanced in the play. It is full of the 'symbolism' of the last period, a 'symbolism' which is not imposed upon the dramatic development but springs from it and completes it.) Given the extraordinary freedom, the breadth of reference which we have noted in the verse of these scenes, it is only a step forward to introduce effects that are not strictly part of the development of the drama, but which the unprecedented control of the poet succeeds in welding organically into the total effect. 'Sleep' is already itself such a 'symbolic' value; and Shakespeare now adds music, with its associations of harmony, and 'fresh garments', suggesting the purification accomplished in Lear by past sorrow through sleep.) Cordelia prays for his 'restoration' in language which relates the musical symbol of harmony to the revival of unity and health in the torn and divided personality:

‘O, you kind gods,
Cure this great *breach* in his abused nature!
The *untuned* and *jarring* senses, O, wind up
Of this child-changed father.’ (iv. vii.)

By such means, Shakespeare succeeds in transforming Lear's suffering, making it a condition of his revival. We can feel this in his first exclamation:

‘Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.’ (iv. vii.)

This looks back to the 'burning shame' which had 'stung' him and kept him from Cordelia. Lear's difficulty in believing that he really sees his daughter before him indicates both the depth and the remote-

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ness of what he has passed through; the suggested idea of resurrection ('You do me wrong to take me out o' the grave') contributes to the same effect. Lear still suffers on the 'wheel of fire'; but his grief no longer springs from division, from the 'embossed carbuncle' in his own 'corrupted blood' which produced Regan and Goneril; it has become such that it can contemplate 'a soul in bliss'. For the length of this scene, Shakespeare has succeeded in balancing the suffering of the first part of the play with an adequate harmony, fulfilled in Cordelia's prayer for 'benediction' and in Lear's corresponding confession of his fault:

'I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:
You have some cause, they have not.'

This is the central reconciliation; the natural relation of child to father is the resolution of the ruin originally caused by 'blood' in the unity of the family. Shakespeare's 'symbolic' technique has woven Lear's suffering, by transforming it, into the fabric of 'restoration'. The achievement is full of significance for a study of the latest plays.

I have attempted in my account of *Lear* to bring out those aspects of the play which carry on the achievement of *Macbeth* and look forward to *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*. Actually *Lear* is not, according to the standards set by *Macbeth*, in every respect a balanced and finished work of art. The tremendous emotional power behind it does not issue into a coherent whole; its elements remain in part separate and contradictory. Much of

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it is significantly near in mood (as in date) to *Timon of Athens*, which most critics would agree to be a failure. The defect of *Timon* lies in the overthrow, by mere intensity of disgust, of all the order and meaning which Shakespeare had gradually built up through his plays since *Troilus*; the mood of the play, being opposed to order or control of any kind, simply defeats artistic expression. This seems, to a much lesser extent, to be true of *Lear*; the ending, great as it is, seems to nullify the triumph of poetic harmony which preceded it, whilst Lear's tremendous denunciations of the 'rascal beadle' and the 'simpering dame' (iv. vi.) suggest the savage, wholly destructive intensity of *Timon* breaking into all that had been attained. The elements of harmony are those which are important in relation to the last plays. They represent the direction in which Shakespeare was moving; but it is impossible, without sacrificing truth to symmetry, to place *Lear* simply into the sequence which leads from *Macbeth* to *Antony*. *Lear*, in fact, seems to stand in relation to the last plays (and, in particular, to *The Winter's Tale*) much as *Hamlet* is related to the tragedies which follow it. It shows the same development of new interests, of a new type of technique; but it is still too bound by what preceded it, as well as by its own contradictions, to result in a fully balanced play. With this qualification in mind, we can now proceed to the last plays.

CHAPTER SIX

H

Robert Henry
College Student

THE SINGLE STATE OF MAN

I

I HAVE tried throughout to relate developments in Shakespeare's individuality to the evolution of the distinctive qualities of the Shakespearian image. The original ambiguity of the Sonnets and 'problem' plays, which reflected a contradiction between 'fact' and 'ideal' at the heart of experience, developed into a separation of the elements of 'good' and 'evil', of harmony and disruption, in the mature tragedies; and this, in turn, prepared the way for the symbolic technique foreshadowed in parts of *Lear*, in which ambiguity and conflict are replaced by the ordering of every element of the poetic drama into a single, concordant unity. The 'symbolic' element, which is first suggested in the enigmatic part played by the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, appears fully matured in the reconciliation of Lear to Cordelia, without usurping in any way the requirements either of 'poetry' or of 'drama'; indeed, all these elements—poetry, drama, and 'symbol'—contribute inseparably to the total effect. If the plot seems sometimes in danger of becoming too vast and diffuse for ordinary dramatic purposes, if the introduction of music and highly personal symbolic 'themes' seem to have extended beyond the proper limits of poetry, we have

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to recognize a parallel growth in Shakespeare's poetic resources to meet the situation; the range of imagery in the latest plays becomes so extraordinary, the poet's capacity for bringing vast fields of experience into the most harmonious contact is felt to be so unique, that the extensions of dramatic technique seem inevitable and necessary to the expression of Shakespeare's mastery. In short, we are dealing with a reconciliation worthy of the divisions we have analysed.

The poetry of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the most harmonious and completely realized of the last plays, shows this extraordinary range of imagery, and implies an equally extraordinary power of fusing it into a single and continuous effect. Shakespeare himself could not have written this at any previous point in his career:

‘O, see, my women,
The crown o’ the earth doth melt. My lord!
O, withered is the garland of the war,
The soldier’s pole is fall’n; young boys and girls
Are level now with men; the odds is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon.’ (iv. xv.)

One has only to attempt to separate a few of the images in this ‘knot intrinsicate’ of poetry to realize the *extent* of Shakespeare’s control. ‘The crown o’ the earth’ carries on naturally enough the tone of transcendent royalty with which Cleopatra has emphasized Antony’s greatness and the depth of her love and grief. The verb ‘melt’ is not *factually* related to ‘crown’; Shakespeare has chosen it because it removes any sense of harshness from

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Antony's death by suggesting a natural, gentle dissolution into purest air (there is a similar feeling about Cleopatra's own death—'As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle . . .') and so prepares for the sense of triumph associated with Cleopatra's grief. 'The soldier's pole' is probably the standard of war; but 'pole', taken together with 'crown' and the following 'boys and girls', bears a complex suggestion of May-day, when love and the renewed life of spring meet in triumph; if we set these joyful associations against the corresponding depths of Cleopatra's desolation, we shall feel something of the tremendous emotional range of the play. The final reference to the 'visiting moon' lends further point to this relation of joy to death and sorrow. The fact that, after Antony's death, there is left nothing 'remarkable' beneath the moon suggests not only the extent of Cleopatra's loss, but also implies that their union, while it lasted, reduced all earthly things to a dull uniformity; whilst they were together, kingdoms *were* indeed clay. The whole passage is built upon a breadth of imagery which does not yield in complexity to the ambiguity of the Sonnets; but, unlike them, its complexity is subdued to a harmony which regards both desolation and triumph as integral parts of a single mood. The poetry of Antony no longer turns, like that of even the later tragedies, upon a cleavage between 'good' and 'evil' within the unity of experience. It depends rather upon a perfect continuity between the 'flesh', with its associations of earth and death, and the transcendent justification of passion in terms of emotional value and vitality. This con-

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tinuity is in no way vague or sentimental, but is splendidly realized in a harmonious scale of related imagery; to reconstruct this scale step by step is the critic's task in dealing with Antony.

The story of Antony and Cleopatra is set against an imperial background. Its course is influenced by events significant for the whole Roman world, and Shakespeare deliberately incorporates into his poetry a sense of vast issues and tremendous dominions. Antony is a 'triple pillar of the world', and the attendant who bears off the drunken Lepidus carries upon his shoulders 'the third part of the world'; Octavia, again, tells Antony that a quarrel between him and Cæsar would be—

'As if the world should cleave, and that slain men
Should solder up the rift.' (III. iv.)

But the world of the Triumvirs, vast as it is and correspondingly opulent, is none the less mean and decayed. Shakespeare's presentation of it is full of touches which carry us back to *Henry IV*; there is a good deal of Prince Hal in Cæsar's self-controlled, ungenerous calculation, and Antony's political folly is continually stressed. The great drunken scene (II. vii.) turns upon a contrast between the witless conviviality of the Triumvirs and the 'quicksands' of sober treachery represented by Menas and turned aside by Antony less through honesty than through weakness; the mastery of the scene, which lies in the superb counterpointing of the related motives of folly and treachery, is beyond *Henry IV*, but the inspiration is that of the earlier play. Shakespeare's matured experience moves him to present his

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characters in a world whose imperial pretensions are over-ripe and luxurious. He presents this world, as we have seen him do in the earlier plays, in terms of bodily surfeit and disorder; Antony describes 'the present state' as one in which—

‘quietness grown sick of rest would *purge*
By any desperate change.’ (I. iii.)

'Rest' is the stagnation produced by opulence which leads to the purge of revolution. When the Messenger, in the following scene, brings Cæsar news that 'flush youth revolt', he is relating imperial disorder further to bodily surfeit; his words are given point by those of Cæsar which immediately precede them:

‘This *common* body,
Like to a vagabond flag upon the stream
Goes to and back, lackeying the varying tide
To *rot* itself with motion.’ (I. iv.)

Even without feeling the Elizabethan association of 'common' with sexual promiscuity, we can appreciate that Shakespeare is using this sense of disorder and decay in the body to relate the universal situation to the particular love of Antony for Cleopatra.

The decadence of the Roman world is balanced by similar elements in Antony. His advancing years are stressed more than once, and Cæsar's exposures of his vices are too full of poetic individuality, too closely related to the over-ripeness which is so striking a feature of the play, for us to neglect them:

‘... he fishes, drinks and wastes
The lamps of night in revel.’ (I. iv.)

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Nor does Shakespeare pass over the wanton cruelty of Antony's treatment of Cæsar's messenger; he is to be whipped until 'he whine aloud for mercy'. Most decisive of all, every meeting between Antony and Cleopatra, from the moment of that first scathing comment on his poetic ecstasy:

‘ Excellent falsehood!
Why did he marry Fulvia, and not love her? ’ (I. i.)

is the exposure of an ageing libertine; though, needless to say, every one of these meetings is a great deal more than that. Shakespeare did not write a great play by ignoring Antony's weaknesses, but by assimilating these weaknesses into the dominating triumphant mood of the play. Antony's love is justified in terms of its intensity and vitality *in spite of* his continual awareness that Cleopatra is 'a whore of Egypt', a stale 'scrap for Cæsar's trencher', in spite of the fact that his passion is the infatuation of a middle-aged soldier for a woman who had already served Julius Cæsar's pleasure. The gap between this infatuation and the triumphant feeling of the final scenes, with Cleopatra dying on her throne spurning the lord of the world as an 'ass unpolicied', is bridged by a wonderful modification of connected imagery; rottenness becomes the ground for fertility, opulence becomes royalty, infatuation turns to transcendent passion, all by means of an *organic* process which ignores none of its own earlier stages, but passes through them and integrates them in the unity of its purpose.

The starting-point of this poetic 'redemption', so to speak, of the love of Antony and Cleopatra, is the

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very rottenness we have discovered in the Roman world. This over-ripeness is a fitting background to the story of mature passion, which is related to it, but it also lends point to Antony's assertion of the supremacy of his personal feeling. Antony undoubtedly gambled away his dignity as a 'triple pillar of the world', but the corruption and treachery of that world went far to redeem his folly and to justify his contempt:

'Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall; here is my space.' (I. i.)

To assert, however, that Shakespeare was content to make this contrast after the manner of the seeker after moral axioms ('All for Love: or The World Well Lost') is seriously to underestimate his achievement. Shakespeare relates the rottenness of the Roman world *poetically* to the individual fortunes of Antony and Cleopatra; he makes his love-imagery spring from this over-ripeness, joining the lovers and their world in a single poetic creation. This is seen most clearly in the poetry of Cleopatra, and especially in the manner in which it derives from the idea of Egypt, from the overflowing fertility of the Nile. Her love is, in the words of Antony's promise, 'the *fire* that *quickens Nilus' slime*', a living fertility, vividly expressed in terms of fire, that grows by a continuous process of nature out of the corruption of 'slime'. The play is full of this magnificent balance between decay and fruitfulness; in her declining fortunes, Cleopatra describes herself as 'the blown rose', combining beauty and decline in a delicate unity of sensation. So assured is Shakespeare's

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mastery that he can impart dignity even to Cleopatra's relations with Julius Cæsar; in those days, she says, she was 'a morsel for a monarch', and the 'monarch' redeems the indignity of 'morsel', of being 'a scrap for Cæsar's trencher'. But perhaps the greatest example of Cleopatra's conversion of slime into fertility is her speech to Antony immediately after the whipping and dismissal of Thyreus:

' . . . as it determines, so
Dissolve my life! The next Cæsarion smite!
Till by degrees the memory of my womb,
Together with my brave Egyptians all,
By the discandying of this pelleted storm
Lie graveless, till the flies and gnats of Nile
Have buried them for prey.' (III. xiii.)

By sheer intensity of poetic sensing, life is produced from rotting and decay; Shakespeare even makes the speech look forward to the regal oblivion of Cleopatra's death. 'Discandying' imparts an intense sweetness to corruption, and 'dissolve' gives death an ease and inevitability which relates it to the exaltation of the aspic scene; whilst 'the memory of my womb' suggests the full fertility of her passion, the richness of life which is felt to spring from the corruption implied in the 'flies and gnats of Nile'. Within the subtle variations of this speech is contained the whole range of Cleopatra's poetic development.

These complexities have one aim—to evolve the greatness of Cleopatra's passion out of its very imperfection, out of the very impermanence of the flesh and the corrupt world with which it is organically connected. As the story proceeds, Shakespeare sub-

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jects Antony to a similar development, making him, without evading or sentimentalizing his weaknesses, fit for the magnificence of his end. From the first, his generosity and bravery are brought out by contrast with Cæsar's calculating meanness and the treachery of the surrounding world. Even his mad renunciation of practical affairs is balanced by the splendid assertion of his love; 'Kingdoms are clay', and the only value of the clay is to be a ground in which the fertility of love may take root. In accordance with this intention, the decline of Antony's fortunes is balanced by a whole series of devices which co-operate to make him stand apart from the increasingly trivial issues of the Roman world; that issues so great, so imperial in their scope should be felt as trivial is in itself a measure of the quality of his passion. His generosity to his followers, and in particular to the deserter, Enobarbus, is set against Cæsar's mean attempt (which, by a crowning stroke of irony, Cleopatra humours) to seduce the queen from his side; we feel that Antony's prodigality is always close enough to bounty to add strength to the poetic sensation of fertility in love. Shakespeare never disguises Antony's incompetence: even at the end he fails to stab himself to the heart and recommends Cleopatra to trust only the very man (Proculeius) by whom she is immediately betrayed; but this incompetence becomes subsidiary and irrelevant in the depth and intensity of his poetry. The evolution of his dignity balances a similar greatness in Cleopatra until, after their defeat, they are ready for the great meeting on the monument (iv. xv.), in which irony and criticism are dissolved (the word is

representative) into transcendent poetry.

Shakespeare's success becomes clear in the final scenes, in which he deals with the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra. Antony's death is a natural consequence of political folly and personal infatuation. We are not allowed to forget that its immediate cause is a miscarriage of Cleopatra's ingenuity, which leads her to announce falsely her own death and so drives him to despair; to the last, Antony is involved in the subterfuges and deceptions which spring inevitably from the nature of his passion. But, just as 'slime' was converted into fertility, just as the folly of renouncing the 'ranged empire' was balanced by the rottenness of that empire, so does death, which is the consequence of Antony's prodigality, become a liberation from triviality and an opening of the way to the poetic assertion of triumph. We can feel this liberation in the very movement of the blank verse, in which 'labour' and its opposite are marvelously fused in a single intuition of peace:

‘now all labour
Mars what it does; yea, very force entangles
Itself with strength.’ (iv. xiv.)

A little further on, death is explicitly associated with love:

‘I will be
A *bridegroom* in my death, and run into ‘t
As to a *lover’s bed*.’ (iv. xiv.)

In this way, Antony's suicide becomes an integral part of the final lyrical assertion of the value and transcendence of passion. It looks forward to the poetry of Cleopatra's death, in which 'baser life'

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is finally transmuted into imagery of fire, air, and immortality.

Cleopatra's last great speech (v. ii.) opens, significantly, with an assertion of 'immortal longings'. The reference to immortality is in full contrast to the impermanence of 'dungy earth', from which her love sprang and in virtue of which her death and Antony's downfall were both inevitable. Yet the immortality invoked by Cleopatra is not a mere abstraction; being connected with 'longings', it is simply the highest assertion of her love for the dead and infinitely exalted Antony, whom she now calls, for the first time in the play, 'Husband!' In the light of this association of love and immortality, death assumes a fresh poetic function; it becomes a dissolution, a purging of all the earthly elements upon which love had been based:

'I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life.'

On the edge of death, only the purest elements remain in Cleopatra—those which are fully, most intensely alive. From a great distance, as it seems, we are reminded of the other elements of 'baser life', the earth and fertile slime from which love sprang, and in virtue of which defeat and death were necessary; but death and defeat have become subdued to the 'immortal longings' which sprang from them, and the adverse fortunes of the world are dismissed as—

'The luck of Cæsar, which the gods give men
To excuse their after wrath.'

Yet, in spite of this note of transcendence, the firm

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basis of poetic imagery on the senses is essential to Shakespeare's effect. The speech is not an abstract triumph, sentimentally imposed upon the body of the play; the elements of 'fire and air' represent a continual refining process from the comparative earthiness of the opening, and the effect of Cleopatra's longings is reinforced by the keenly sensed reference to 'the juice of Egypt's grape', suggesting all that is most alive and delicate in the activity of the senses. This sense of continuity balanced by infinite remoteness is the key to the whole development of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Shakespeare has so refined, so intensified his love poetry by a progressive distillation of sensible experience that it is able to assimilate the apparently incompatible fact of death:

‘The stroke of death is as a lover’s pinch
Which hurts and is desired.’

‘Hurts’ and ‘desired’, which seem so contradictory, are made to reinforce one another by a splendid balance of imagery; the pain implied in ‘hurts’ is felt so delicately, so intensely that it becomes fused with the keenness of the lover’s desire. In this way, death becomes merely an untying of ‘this knot intrinsic’ of body and soul, of infinite desires hitherto subject to adverse and earthly circumstance. The whole development of the play has been tending to this point. The balancing of Antony’s generous folly against Cæsar’s successful meanness, the gradual ascent of the love-imagery from earth and ‘slime’ to ‘fire and air’ are all part of one great process which now needs death to complete it. For

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death, which had seemed in the Sonnets and early tragedies to be incontrovertible evidence of the subjection of love and human values to Time, now becomes by virtue of Shakespeare's poetic achievement an instrument of release, the necessary condition of an experience which, though dependent upon Time and circumstance, is by virtue of its *value* and intensity incommensurate with them—that is, 'immortal'. The emotions of Antony and Cleopatra are built upon 'dungy earth', upon 'Nilus' slime', and so upon Time which these elements by their nature imply; but, just as earth and slime are quickened into fire and air, whilst retaining their sensible qualities as constituent parts of the final experience, so Time itself becomes a necessary element in the creation of 'immortality'. To say that *Antony and Cleopatra* is Shakespeare's greatest play would be futile, if only because it depends upon the earlier tragedies for its effect; but it is certainly the play in which Shakespeare came nearest to unifying his experience into a harmonious and related whole. The 'ambiguity' of the Sonnets is fully resolved into an integrated intuition of its various elements, and poetic technique has become a completely adequate medium for a unified experience.

2

Antony and Cleopatra does not represent the last stage in Shakespeare's development. It was followed by a series of plays—notably *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*—which have

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exercised attention by their poetic complexity and 'symbolical' remoteness, and which are completely unparalleled in English literature. Of these plays, *Pericles* seems to be frankly experimental and appears to contain passages which are not from Shakespeare's pen; the tempest and reconciliation scenes, on the other hand, are full of intimately personal feeling and as masterly as anything in the last plays. *The Tempest* is as certainly Shakespearian as it is remote and difficult; but this remoteness and difficulty makes it less suitable for our purpose, which is to establish and trace the continuity of Shakespeare's development. *The Tempest* presupposes the writing of *The Winter's Tale*, in which the 'symbolic' developments which Shakespeare extended to the later play can be traced more directly to their roots in *Lear* and *Antony*; and, for this reason, it is *The Winter's Tale* rather than *The Tempest* which I propose to select as typical of the last plays.

Having reached the last plays, it is time to consider for a moment the question of 'symbolism' in Shakespeare. Most of the prevalent objections to the very idea of such 'symbolism' are entirely reasonable, but founded on a mistaken conception, which certain critical excesses have tended to foster, of what such symbolism implies. Symbolism, as we commonly know it, assumes an imposition of ideas more or less abstract upon the concrete material of a play: an imposition, to put it crudely, of the 'Let A equal B type'. 'Symbolism' in Shakespeare, on the other hand, grows out of poetic experience, of which it is in fact only a natural extension. We

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have already seen that, as the Shakespearian poetry grew more complex and more profound, it tended to mould plot and character increasingly to its own purpose. Poetry, characters, and plot became increasingly complementary and interdependent facts illuminating an organic unity; the plot of *Macbeth* is not the less dramatic for having become the vehicle for a profoundly personal intuition of the relations of good and evil. The full-grown symbolism of the last plays is only a development from this situation. Shakespeare's power of uniting poetry and drama is now such that the plot has become simply an extension, an extra vehicle of the poetry. Hermione's 'statue' in *The Winter's Tale* is no more realistic than Leontes' lunacy; both are simply a different kind of element to be assimilated into the poetic unity of the play. Shakespeare's experience, at this stage, requires not only verbal richness and complexity, but this type of 'symbolic' incident as part of his poetic purpose; and his elaboration of the poetry of the play is so complete, so homogeneous, that such 'symbols' fit naturally into it. The essence, in short, of Shakespearian 'symbolism' lies in the fact that it springs *out of* the poetry as an extension of the written word; that is why abstract profundities are so misleading in discussing it.

The plot of *The Winter's Tale* is a perfect example of this symbolic technique. It is a story of the divisions created in love and friendship by the passage of Time and the action of 'blood', and of the healing of these divisions. The play turns upon an organic relationship between breakdown and reconstruction, whose successive stages coincide with

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the development of the plot. It opens with a statement by Leontes' councillor, Camillo, of the close friendship which binds together Leontes and Polixenes, Kings respectively of Sicilia and Bohemia. Camillo's prose, however, not only prepares us for the facts of the story, but also proceeds to develop the obscurities which underlie them; beneath the closeness of the intimacy there lie hidden seeds of division:

'Sicilia cannot show himself over-kind to Bohemia. They were trained together in their childhoods; and there rooted betwixt them then such an affection, which cannot choose but branch now. Since their more mature dignities and royal necessities made separation of their society, their encounters, though not personal, have been royally attorneyed with interchange of gifts, letters, loving embassies; that they have seemed to be together, though absent; shook hands, as over a vast; and embraced, as it were, from the ends of opposed winds.' (I. i.)

The significance of this lies in the combination under one image of two processes apparently contradictory—that of natural, unified development existing side by side with that of complete division. The word 'branch' can imply either the natural unity of living growth or a spreading division within that growth. If their affection is such that 'it cannot choose but branch', this may mean either that it must continue to grow and bear fruit, or that it must inevitably separate and break down as it grows. In other words, this friendship, though 'rooted' and natural, bears within it possibilities of disunion. The concluding lines stress the same idea, and the reference to 'opposed winds' further anticipates,

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not only the emotional storm in which the present unity is shortly to be tested, but also the actual tempest in which Leontes' daughter Perdita is lost and found.

The opening scene, then, suggests how the plot will develop. There will be a conflict between two kings, Leontes and Polixenes, a conflict caused by Leontes' jealous conviction that Polixenes has usurped the affections of his wife Hermione. The first movement will be the break-up, already anticipated, of happy human relationships by the folly of Leontes; the exact quality of this break-up needs careful study. Since Shakespeare, as usual, develops at the same time both his plot and its implications, we are soon given another key-passage, which relates the friendship of Leontes and Polixenes to the poet's personal interests:

POLIXENES: We were, fair queen,
Two lads that thought there was no more behind,
But such a day to-morrow as to-day,
And to be boy eternal.

HERMIONE: Was not my lord
The verier wag o' the two?

POLIXENES: We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' the sun,
And bleat the one at the other: what we changed
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd
That any did. Had we pursued that life,
And our weak spirits ne'er been higher rear'd
With stronger blood, we should have answer'd heaven
Boldly 'not guilty'; the imposition clear'd
Hereditary ours.

At this point, the relation between *The Winter's Tale* and the earlier plays becomes clear. Shake-

speare is using this description of youth and spring-time to point a contrast between spontaneous human emotion and the continual pressure of Time—a friction clearly connected with the ‘metaphysical’ ambiguity of the Sonnets. Time, in brief, which brings friendships to maturity, also destroys them, just as, in the earlier works, it destroyed the love which developed with it. But Polixenes’ speech adds something which is peculiar to *The Winter’s Tale*—the connection of this friction with sin, ‘the doctrine of ill-doing’. The action of Time is a corrupting action; experience, as it enters into the life of innocence, destroys the foundations of spontaneous friendship. The youthful freshness which is set against this inevitable deterioration is coupled with an ominous ignorance of ‘ill-doing’; its beauty is nostalgic and pathetically defenceless (“Temptations have since then been born to ’s”, as Polixenes puts it), an inevitable prey to ‘the sneaping winds’ whose immanence has already been suggested.

But Shakespeare’s verse contains more even than this. The cause of Leontes’ quarrel with Polixenes is a jealous conviction that his friend has betrayed him with Hermione, who is known to be with child. Polixenes’ introduction of the idea of ‘blood’, coupled with this obsession, gives the ‘idyllic’ poetry of his speech a fresh meaning by relating it to Shakespeare’s preoccupation with sexual passion. ‘Blood’, in fact, and the action of Time are here fused into a single process; that is the reason for the contrast between ‘stronger blood’ and ‘weak spirits’. The development of the sensual life is necessary to com-

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plete maturity of the spirit. Without it, the ideal of pastoral innocence and eternal youth is ‘weak’, though lovely. It is an ideal which both depends upon its timelessness, and yet is vitiated by the impossibility of attaining sufficient strength except through the action of Time; Time, here equated with the growth of man into sexual maturity, gives the necessary fullness of the ‘blood’ to human experience, but also destroys it by exposure to the impersonal laws of mutability. The sensual life of man gives substance to his development, but also implies the subjection of his ideal innocence to the capacity for evil.

The significance of Leontes’ jealousy, so often dismissed as the product of a dreary obsession, is now clear. Leontes is the ‘embossed carbuncle’ in the organism of human relationships, an inevitable by-product of that organism’s growth through rising ‘blood’ to maturity. He is the infection that develops side by side with love. We may understand his part in the play by referring to the contrasts of feeling in Polixenes’ speech when he becomes aware of Leontes’ suspicions:

‘O, then my best blood turn
To an infected jelly, and my name
Be yoked with his that did betray the Best!
Turn then my freshest reputation to
A savour that may strike the dullest nostril
Where I arrive, and my approach be shunn’d,
Nay, hated too, worse than the great’st infection
That e’er was heard or read.’ (I. ii.)

The sensitive quality of these lines, based upon a delicate balancing of opposed sensual impressions, is

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notable. On the one hand, there is an insistence upon 'infection', allied to the odour of decay; on the other, 'freshness' is associated with the idea of boundless value twice stressed in the use of 'best'. This peculiar quality of 'freshness' is reinforced by Cleomenes' account of Delphos at the opening of Act III, when Leontes' messengers have just returned to Sicilia with the gods' vindication of Hermione's innocence:

'The climate's delicate, the air most sweet,
Fertile the isle, the temple much surpassing
The common praise it bears. (III. i.)

We are immediately reminded of Duncan's account of Macbeth's castle. There also the air was 'delicate', and the King's holiness reflected itself in images of fertility and the nimble sweetness of the senses. In *Macbeth*, too, 'infection' plays an important part in contrast to the 'healing benediction' of the English King; we meet it in the Doctor's work at Dunsinane and in the diseased disorder of Macbeth's mind. The contrast is, in fact, a central one in Shakespeare's work; he is once more using his unrivalled control of sensual imagery to set forth, through Leontes' jealousy and its effects, a relationship between the good and evil elements of experience, between the fullness of maturity, crowned by 'grace', and the vicious and disintegrating savagery of uncontrolled 'blood'.

The mention of 'grace' and fertility brings us to a new step in our analysis, a step connected more especially with Hermione. 'Grace' is a word to note in the later plays. We have already found it in *Macbeth*, applied to Malcolm's just kingship and

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to the sanctity and healing powers of Edward the Confessor. Cleopatra's triumphant beauty on her throne is described as 'her strong toil of grace', and the last plays are full of the word. Its significance, which shifts and develops in the intricate pattern of the plays, is hard to define. In *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare seems to reinforce the religious and even Christian association which the word had already acquired in *Macbeth* with a deeply personal intuition of natural fertility. The last plays represent a profound and highly individual effort to bring the *impasse* suggested by the exploration of the part played by 'blood' in human personality—a part which is at once fulfilment and destruction—into relation with feelings which imply understanding of a great religious tradition.¹ Only so can we read the poetry of Hermione. From the first, she is given religious association; Polixenes addresses her as 'my most sacred lady', and she brings the idea of Grace almost immediately before us in her own words:

‘My last good deed was to entreat her stay:
What was my first? it has an elder sister,
Or I mistake you: O, would her name were Grace!’ (I. ii.)

And when Leontes has replied, she comments, ‘’Tis Grace indeed.’ In her suffering, too, the same note is stressed—

‘this action I now go on
Is for my better grace’— (II. i.)

in which the idea of purification behind Lear's

¹ This statement does not, of course, imply any particular attitude to the question of Shakespeare's own *beliefs*; such questions necessarily fall outside the scope of criticism.

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sufferings is repeated with a much more explicit sense of religious values.

This, however, is only a part of Hermione's significance; the rest of it lies in her relationship to Leontes and in her child. Leontes' jealousy is much more than criminal shortsightedness. It is a sensual repulsion of the uncontrolled 'blood' against a right sexual relationship, against natural fertility. In his insults he stresses brutally the fact that his wife is with child:

‘let her sport herself
With that she’s big with; for ’t is Polixenes
Has made her swell thus.’ (ii. i.)

His words re-echo the conversation between Hermione's ladies at the beginning of the scene, words which give a rich and natural quality to her child-bearing:

FIRST LADY: The queen your mother rounds apace: we shall

Present our services to a fine new prince
One of these days.

SECOND LADY: She is spread of late

Into a goodly bulk: good time encounter her. (ii. i.)

It should be easy to connect the temper of this with the imagery of fertility common in *Lear* and developed in *Antony*. Leontes' sin is more than a personal offence; it is against nature, and so against 'grace'. The perverted keenness of his senses, at once sharpened and debased by 'blood', have become a spiritual 'infection', like that which faced the Doctor at Dunsinane, when he said 'More needs she the divine than the physician'. Because of this infection, Hermione suffered, the natural human

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relationship between Leontes and Polixenes was rudely broken, the young Prince Mamillius died out of the course of nature, and the winter of the gods' displeasure rested upon them all. The first stage of the play's development was complete with the withdrawal and announced death of Hermione; the rest of it was to show how 'grace' could spring from the jarrings and maladjustments of 'blood', the spring of right human relationship out of the winter of disorder and penance.

The turning-point of *The Winter's Tale* is not so much the long, central gap of sixteen years as the scene (III. iii.) in which Antigonus leaves Hermione's child, banished by order of Leontes, on the desert shore of Bohemia, where it is found and cherished by shepherds. The first part of the action was closed by the series of calamities which concluded Hermione's trial, ending in Leontes' confession of guilt:

‘Apollo’s angry; and the heavens themselves
Do strike at my injustice.’ (III. ii.)

The singularly beautiful prose of the storm-scene strikes a new note, which can be paralleled in *Pericles* and *The Tempest*. The disturbed skies and the angry sea carry on the impression of the divine displeasure ('The heavens with what we have in hand are angry', as the Mariner puts it), and serve as a background to the central remark of the whole scene—'thou mettest with things dying, I with things newborn'. This scarcely needs the parallel from *Pericles*—

‘. . . did you not name a tempest,
A birth, and death?’— (V. iii.)

to give it point. It connects Hermione's child at once with the general theme of 'grace' and fertility born out of passion and jealousy. The child is the product of that mingling of 'bloods' which so repelled Leontes and jarred upon his peace; but it is also the result of that natural human fertility which is the soil of 'grace', so that it looks not only backwards to the divisions of the past, but forward to the reconciliation of the future.

In this way we are led up to the great pastoral scene (iv. iv.), which is by no means a simple, almost naïve contrast with the preceding bitterness, but a subtle and artistically logical development of the situation. The closely woven strands of feeling that run through this apparent simplicity have already been foreshadowed in Polixenes' account of his youthful friendship with Leontes; they are further developed in the dialogue upon the flowers between him and Perdita. Perdita's speech is particularly relevant:

‘Sir, the year growing ancient,
Not yet on summer’s death, nor on the birth
Of trembling winter, the fairest flowers o’ the season
Are our carnations and streak’d gillyvors,
Which some call nature’s bastards: of that kind
Our rustic garden’s barren; and I care not
To get slips of them.’

A reader aware of the possibilities of Shakespearian language will not pass by the beautiful way in which summer and winter, birth and death, are linked by the sequence of words into a subtle continuity. 'Death' is joined to summer, and 'birth' and 'trembling' are given to winter, so as to suggest

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that the passage of the seasons is only part of one inseparable process; and, since we know that the relations of birth and death are central to the play, we now realize that the various developments of *The Winter's Tale* are, like the cycle of the seasons, a necessary and connected whole. The contrast of the two seasons has a further importance; summer is connected with the full flowering of youth in the love of Florizel and Perdita, Bohemia's son and Sicilia's banished daughter, whilst 'winter' reminds us that the age of their parents is soon to affect the childrens' relationship. It is a winter of lust and sin, which implies the vanity and barrenness of jealous, impotent old age, in contrast to the fair summer of youth. Here it is important to note that Polixenes' brutality in his separation of the lovers, and especially in his ferocious attack upon Perdita's beauty ('I'll have thy beauty scratched with briars'), is an exact complement to Leontes' earlier sin; it proceeds from the same impotence of aged blood, as we are shown by the continual emphasis on age and bitterness. By the time Camillo has brought his masters together, *both* will have had cause to regret the importunities of the blood. At present, however, the play has only reached a stage intermediate between the winter of disordered passion and the full summer of 'grace'. Perdita's speech goes on to make this clear. Between these two seasons there are flowers which have a certain beauty of their own, but a beauty imperfect and alloyed, like that of human passion unconsummated by 'grace'. These flowers are 'carnations', in which the *carn*-stem has a clear connection with the flesh,

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and ‘streak’d gillyvors’, ‘bastards’ between crude nature and the realm of ‘grace’.

It is important to catch these associations; but more striking still is Perdita’s attitude to these flowers in the dialogue which follows. Polixenes raises important issues by pointing out that the ‘streak’d’ process is after all engrained in nature. But when he tries, on the strength of this argument, to dissuade Perdita from excluding these flowers, she turns away with an extreme repulsion which is very significant:

‘I’ll not put
The dibble in earth to set one slip of them;
No more than were I painted I would wish
This youth should say ’t were well, and only therefore
Desire to breed by me.’

The introduction of the familiar Elizabethan horror of being ‘painted’, a horror felt with intense physical loathing, together with the force of ‘breed’, shatters the idyllic atmosphere pretty effectively. Clearly the innocent poetry of Florizel and Perdita was not a sufficient resolution of the great disunities developed in the early part of the play, and the brief moment of pastoral happiness is, in fact, broken by the intervention of the old and jealous Polixenes. Indeed, one can discern a certain pathetic weakness, a kind of wilting from life, in the great list of flowers just below. The emphasis upon ‘virgin branches’ and ‘maidenheads’ is full of meaning in the light of the intense emphasis on passion which preceded it: still more so if we observe the contrast with ‘hot lavender’—the epithet is full of Elizabethan associations with ‘blood’—and the other flowers given to

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men of middle age. Above all, there is the feeling behind the famous lines:

‘ . . . pale primroses,
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phoebus in his strength, a malady
Most incident to maids.’

The beauty of these lines is devoid of strength; it even clings pathetically to its own lack of vigour. The final reconciliation will be far less precarious in quality. The spring-like beauty of this scene will have to be intensified and reinforced by the deep penance of Leontes. Only thus can the idyllic pastoral be given sufficient substance to balance the harshness of the early scenes; only so can a feeling for innocent beauty be raised to Shakespeare’s unique sensation of the fertility and maturity of ‘ grace ’.

This transformation is the work of the last Act. In it the Shakespearian experience, different in kind and quality from anything else in English poetry, reaches complete expression. The fetters of the plot are dissolved; or rather the plot is perfectly assimilated to the interplay of imagery. The words of the reconciled parties at the foot of Hermione’s ‘ statue ’ are as significant in their sequence as in their sense; they proceed by an antiphonal building-up of the harmonious effect. This sequence is given continuity by the thread of Leontes’ slow awakening to the fact that Hermione herself is before him, and by her almost imperceptible coming to life, which itself corresponds to the birth of the new ‘ grace ’ out of the long winter of his penance. In this final scene, technique becomes the perfectly free and adequate instrument of experience; the development of imag-

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ery which we have tried to trace throughout the Shakespearian pattern is logically complete.

The last Act opens at the moment when Leontes' 'saint-like sorrow', which has dominated him ever since the tremendous events which concluded Hermione's trial, is ready to be crowned by reconciliation with the divine powers he has offended. It also follows the scene which introduced the new spirit of spring-like pastoral, temporarily broken by its lack of power to resist the bitter enmity of blood, but now ready to be reinforced by the deeper experience of the grace-smitten Leontes. The King's highest folly had been that he had—

'Destroy'd the sweet'st companion that e'er man
Bred his hopes out of.' (v. i.)

'Grace' and fertility are once more connected, and the reconciliation of the old kings will be the work of the children, and especially of Perdita, who was born of her father's passion, but had no part in the bitterness and jealousy which accompanied and marred its natural fruitfulness. Dion's speech, therefore, has a meaning far beyond its value in the development of the argument:—

'What were more holy
Than to rejoice the former queen is well?
What holier than, for royalty's repair,
For present comfort and for future good,
To bless the bed of majesty again
With a sweet fellow to 't?' (v. i.)

The words add the essential note of holiness to the emphasis on human fruitfulness which preceded it, and we can see how the sensation embodied in this

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play is to be completed. Penitence and devotion have been raised to sanctity, and the functions of 'blood' can now become, no longer the cause of jealousy and division, but a source of life and strength to the unified and gracious personality. In the light of this, we can appreciate the new depth and intensity of Leontes' love, when he says of Hermione:

‘I might have look'd upon my queen's full eyes;
Have taken treasure from her lips,’ (v. i.)

where fullness and richness are typical attributes of Shakespearian 'grace'. Again, when he abjures all other loves in the light of his memory of his Queen's eyes—

‘Stars, stars,
And all eyes else dead coals! ’— (v. i.)

his intensity suggests how Shakespeare has overcome his constant sense of the pressure of 'devouring Time'. His answer is not that of the philosopher, but of the artist; it consists in opposing to Time the value of Leontes' experience, intensifying it until Time is felt to be only a necessary element in the creation of this vitality. Time, as in *Antony*, has become irrelevant; in *The Winter's Tale*, it has served only to create the fullness of 'grace'. The entry of age and bitterness, in the person of Polixenes, who is announced at the end of the scene, is now only an incident preceding the final reconciliation; the angry Bohemia does not even appear in person before his anger is dissolved. The reason is clear. A general forgiveness in the pastoral scene would have seemed naïve and unconvincing. The emotional balance had

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yet to be completed by the note of penance issuing into ‘grace’; and the destructive qualities of ‘blood’ had not to be laid aside but transcended.

The construction and spirit of the conclusion has been touched upon, and, indeed, it springs out of all that has gone before. I might add, however, that the bringing to life of Hermione contributes to the general impression of Time’s insignificance when compared with love sanctioned by ‘grace’. When Leontes begs that the deceptive life-likeness, as he considers it, of Hermione’s ‘statue’ may not be taken from him :

‘Make me to think so twenty years together,—

and echoes the idea so emphatically below in his exclamation—‘No, not these twenty years’, he is once more suggesting the time-theme; but he is also establishing the fact that Time stands still when he contemplates his love. This can only be justified by the power of the poetic process, which shows us that this conception of love is one of life and value, incommensurate with Time, which is only a condition of it. A great poet’s work is neither a religion nor a philosophy, but, in Shakespeare, it is the exploration by a superbly gifted sensibility of an attitude to life which these things have helped to form. The difficulty of criticizing Shakespeare’s last plays lies in the impossibility of defining precisely the author’s attitude to many of the ‘symbols’ he employs. We have no right to assume, from Shakespeare’s use of profoundly religious ideas, that he ever underwent what we are accustomed to call, rather vaguely, a ‘conversion’. All we can say is that these

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ideas, religious or otherwise, seemed to him adapted to the expression of a tremendously intricate and balanced experience. That experience I have tried to trace from the Sonnets to *The Winter's Tale*, from complex ambiguity to unparalleled richness and harmony. The essential sensation of *The Winter's Tale*—that 'the red blood reigns in the winter's pale'—is valuable for the depth and intensity of the life revealed in it. We should not allow ourselves to neglect it.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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CONCLUSION

I HAVE attempted to trace the developing content of Shakespeare's poetic drama through the growing complexity of his verse. From plain statement it advances, through an increasing consciousness in the poet of the suppleness and immediacy of his medium, to a remarkable capacity for dealing with the *relations* between one set of feelings and another; this capacity is most typically expressed in the ambiguities of the Sonnets. There is about these ambiguities nothing literary or artificial, unless it be their origin in a cultured convention of the age; they depend simply upon an awareness of the possible range of human emotions, of the existence of complex and even contradictory attitudes to a single situation. This awareness, which Shakespeare shared with all his gifted contemporaries, is the most individual quality of the Elizabethan mind; there has been nothing quite like it either before or since in English literature. One might say that it represents the impact upon a culture based on mediaeval standards of the fruitful, but disturbing, Renaissance discovery of the self; it was no accident that Petrarch, the first modern analyst of the self in European literature, was also the creator of the sonnet convention. Ambiguity, in fact, is not a

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poetic device, but the expression of a universal state of soul; and the relation of the apparent directness of the vernacular to this fresh subtlety of feeling is the starting-point for an understanding of Shakespeare's verse.

Shakespeare's poetry, like that of the best of the 'metaphysical' poets who were his contemporaries or successors, turns upon a distinction between two elements in human experience; that of 'reason' (to use the terminology of *Hamlet*), and that of 'sense', or keen but unrelated sensible feeling. Such a split is unthinkable in terms of mediaeval thought; but it is fundamental to an understanding of the modern consciousness. Elizabethan English, with its capacity for delicate overtones and subtle connections, is a perfect instrument for the expression of these relations. Shakespeare's 'problem' (if we may use so self-conscious a word) is that of imparting order and poetic significance to the keenly felt but separate elements of the sensual life. The relation between 'reason' and 'sense' is most typically apprehended under the form of sexual passion; and the action of Time is the connecting factor between them. From the Sonnets onwards, two elements stand out in Shakespeare's treatment of sensible experience—its intense vitality and its transitory nature. Both are the creation of Time, because both emotional fulfilment and final separation are implied in the real but transitory ecstasy of passion; we have seen this dilemma most unequivocally expressed in *Troilus and Cressida*. This is the ambiguity which renders so tense and subtle the language of the great Sonnets, and which underlies the questionings

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and frustrations of the ‘problem’ plays. As Shakespeare proceeds to the works of his maturity, the comparatively abstract element of ‘reason’, which had been in *Hamlet* and *Troilus* strictly subsidiary to the consciousness of frustration, is replaced by an intricate but fruitful building-up of the related elements of poetic experience. Time, instead of destroying the values of life by its very indifference, becomes strictly subsidiary to the development of these values. The ‘evil’ elements of experience are isolated in *Macbeth* and *Lear*, until Time, instead of destroying the living emotion, becomes firmly subject to it. In the poetry of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter’s Tale*, it has become absorbed into a vitality which, although still conditioned by it, is no longer commensurate with it. Ambiguous images and conflicting characters are replaced by an unprecedented range of imagery and ‘symbolic’ treatment of dramatic material which serves to convey a related and harmonious poetry. Even *The Winter’s Tale*, which opens with one of the most bitter oppositions in Shakespeare, leads to a corresponding harmony which balances it at the close; both opposition and harmony find their place in the reconciling function of Shakespearian ‘grace’.

This, in a few words, is the account of Shakespeare’s achievement which I have tried to present in the preceding pages. If *The Divine Comedy* sums up and unifies the discoveries of a whole period of European civilization, its science, its politics, its philosophy, and its religion, Shakespeare’s great series of plays is a synthesis of the experience of the *individual*; as such, it is supreme.

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Needless to say, the last stage in the process we have outlined is as fully dramatic as the first; but the drama itself, so different in feeling and so superior in subtlety to that of any other Elizabethan, can only be fully appreciated if we are prepared to take into account its 'metaphysical'¹ content. The characters and the situations are conditioned by the poetic emotion, and this in turn attains its full expression through the conventions of a fully adequate stage-craft. That is the full meaning of the commonplace assertion that poetry and drama are in Shakespeare intimately fused into the unity of 'poetic drama'.

¹ Needless to say, I use the word 'metaphysical' in the strictly literary sense coined by Dr. Johnson and most commonly applied to the intricate poetry of Donne.

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